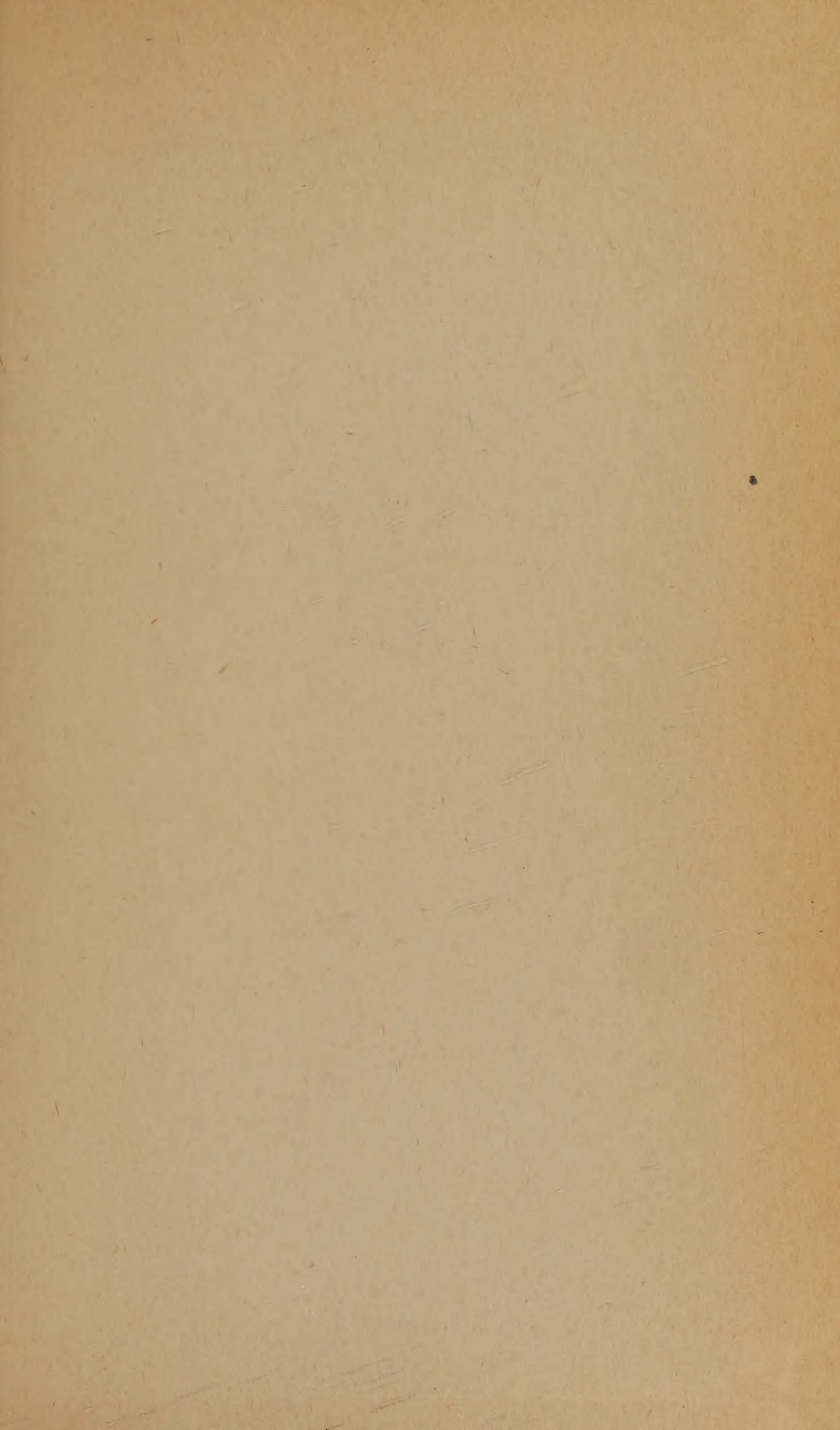


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SPENSER

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OF ENGLISH LITERATURE,
VOLUME I.

SPENSER

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PREFACE

THIS volume reproduces, with very little alteration, the text of six lectures which I was asked to deliver for the Turnbull Foundation at the Johns Hopkins University of Baltimore, in October 1922.

Subsequently I published a general study on Spenser, in French (*Edmund Spenser*, Librairie Bloud et Gay, Paris, 1923¹). Ample space was given in this work, both to an account of the poet's life and also to verse translations of the most famous passages in his work. This study, moreover, had the advantage of being complete and followed the logical sequence more closely than the lectures. But it was written for French students who possessed no book in their own language specially devoted to Spenser and had no means of access to his poems, other than the originals themselves.

After some hesitation, it has seemed preferable not to offer the English reader a full translation of the French volume, but only those excerpts which I had already made for the purposes of lecturing to an American audience.

My chief aim in these Lectures has been to call attention to what I consider the great and lasting glories of Spenser's poetry and at the same time to

¹ My thanks are due to MM. Bloud et Gay, who have kindly allowed me to make free use of those passages which coincide in the French volume and the Lectures.

examine certain claims made for him with less justification. My personal views are most clearly illustrated in Chapter V. of the present volume.

Professor W. L. Renwick's admirable book (*Edmund Spenser, an Essay on Renaissance Poetry*, 1925) had not yet appeared when mine was written. It contains the best study of Spenser's relations to European poetry so far written. Professor Renwick's scope is much wider than my own, but our aims are different enough to make me hope that the following pages may still have some interest and value for the reader, even after the publication of so remarkable an essay.

E. L.

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SPENSER

CHAPTER I

SPENSER'S CHARACTER

WE have a vivid glimpse of Spenser's personal appearance among the recollections of the poet gathered together by John Aubrey. According to his informant, the actor Christopher Beeston, of the Queen's company, the poets' poet, the author of the *Fairy Queen*, was "a little man, who wore short haire, little bands and little cuffs."

A slight figure, surmounted by a fine head, if we judge from the portraits of Spenser that have been preserved, particularly from the elegant one in the possession of Lord Kinnoul. His face bore every mark of refinement, with its lofty backward-sloping forehead, its thin mobile lips, grey-blue eyes, auburn hair and pointed beard. The whole conveys an idea of delicacy and distinction rather than of breadth and geniality. A striking contrast with the famous though crude Droeshout portrait of Shakespeare, the characteristics of which are the fullness and roundness of the face, the placid good-humour of the looks, the stoutness of the bust. Surely Spenser had more in him of the dainty idealist than of the hearty "bon vivant."

We catch another glimpse of him at twenty-seven, when, after being secretary to a bishop, he passed into the household of the Earl of Leicester. His change in appearance struck his College friend, Gabriel Harvey. Spenser has suddenly become the perfect courtier, half-gallant, half-soldier. Harvey cracks jokes on his "thrice honourable mustachios and subboscus (chin-beard)." He calls him "my young Italianate signior and French monsieur," "your monsieurship" or "your gallantship" or "Il magnifico Signor Immerito Benevolo."

But we have other means of conjuring up the living man. We may almost hear him speak. In a well-known passage, another friend of the poet, Lodovick Bryskett, describes Spenser addressing a select audience in Dublin when he was about thirty-two. Surely Bryskett, who was something of a poet himself, strove to the best of his dramatic faculties to put appropriate words and phrases into Spenser's mouth, and more especially convey that mode of delivery which was habitual to him. Unless he utterly failed, we may infer from the passage that Spenser's way of speaking was at times somewhat refined and solemn, a little pompous and heavy. Let us hear his speech, or part of it, for it is too long to be given entire. Spenser has been asked to unlock to the company "the goodly cabinet" of moral philosophy, and this is his answer:

"Though it may seeme hard for me to refuse the request made by you all, whom every one alone I should for many respects be willing to gratifie; yet, as the case standeth, I doubt not but with the consent of the most part of you, I shall be excused at this time of the taske

which would be laid upon me, for sure I am that it is not unknowne unto you that I have already undertaken a work tending to the same effect, which is in historical verse under the title of a Faerie Queene . . .," etc.

This correct, balanced, well-connected way of speaking cannot be a mere fiction of Bryskett, for we hear much the same accents in the dialogue of *A View of the Present State of Ireland*, wherein Spenser himself, under the name of Irenæus, discourses with Eudoxus. Such, very probably, was his manner in a distinguished assembly, when he was careful of his language. Of his more familiar style of talk we have good examples in his letters to Harvey. His fluent, equable prose favourably compares with the vehemence and pedantry of his correspondent. Here Spenser never seems to strain his voice. A sort of sober cheerfulness and mild irony pervade his epistles. In them, with their many changes of themes, scraps of tentative verse, and postscripts, we gain an idea of how he would chat when at ease. Thus did the young men discourse and debate at Cambridge. Thus did they bandy their old-fashioned witticisms, Harvey with more of the elephantine heaviness of a Rabelaisian scholar, Spenser with the easier grace of the courtier. But the cheerful mood only seems to have been occasional with him, and not normal. In health he was as delicate as in stature diminutive. So it was at least while he was a Cambridge student, where in two years he was couched on the sick list five times, no less than sixteen weeks in all. Great sensitiveness of body and soul was the consequence of that sickly temperament. Spenser was much like the young cowherd Cuddie

(in his Second Eclogue) who could bear unrepiningly neither the frost of February nor the buffets of Fortune:

Ah! for pittie! will rancke winter's rage
 These bitter blasts never ginne tasswage?
 The kene cold blows through my beaten hyde,
 All as I were through the body gryde . . .
 . . . My flowering youth is foe to frost.

It is all very well for old Thenot to preach resignation. Cuddie cannot abide the rough weather. His thoughts must needs turn to sun, pleasure and love. He must live in the brightness and warmth of summer days.

Cuddie represents here the poetic complexion, Spenser's own complexion. Spenser never had any doubt about the duty of society to the poet, a glorious fragile creature, whom they ought to endow with all the good things of this life. He will incessantly claim lordly favour and State assistance as his due. No poetry can thrive except when the heart is free from all material cares:

Ne wont with crabbéd care the Muses dwell.

Good meat and wine are the necessary ingredients of enthusiasm:

Who ever casts to compasse weightie prise,
 And thinks to throwe out thund'ring words of threat,
 Let poure in lavish cups and thriftie bits of meat,
 For Bacchus fruit is friend to Phœbus wise,
 And, when with wine the braine begins to sweate,
 The numbers flowe as fast as Spring doth rise.

As the age in which he lives showers no largesse upon the poet, Spenser has little indulgence for it. He draws unfavourable comparisons with more fortunate

ages when a Mecænas fostered a Horace or a Virgil. He depicts the Nine Muses as all equally distressed, woeful and indignant. For he is as greedy of the delights of life as impatient of its roughness. His nature is eminently amorous. So he appeared to the friend of his youth, Gabriel Harvey, who knew him well and was in constant fear of seeing him lay aside his high poetical office to run after some lovely lady or other. Harvey wrote to him in his strange mixture of Latin and English:

“Alas! my fine gallant, great lover of young girls, notorious Pamphilus, consider the end which at some time or other waits for thee, and all those who lean to woman and the whole sect of feminists [or lovers]—and I shall then be content to appeal to your own learned experience, whether it be or be not true: *Amare amarum*. Love is not a God as some affirm. It is bitterness and folly.”

But we have still better testimony than Harvey's; we have Spenser's description of himself. He has given us a full picture of this side of his nature in *Muiopotmos*. He is Clarion the butterfly, irresistibly attracted by all the lovely flowers of Nature's garden, impelled by his instinct to fly from one beauty to another:

To the gay gardens his unstaïd desire
Him wholly carri'd, to refresh his sprights:
There lavish Nature, in her best attire,
Pours forth sweet odours and alluring sights;
And Art, with her contending, doth aspire
T'excel the natural with made delights;
And all that fair or pleasant may be found,
In riotous excess doth there abound.

There he arriving round about doth fly,
 From bed to bed, from one to other border,
 And takes survey, with curious busy eye,
 Of every flower and herb there set in order:
 Now this, now that, he tasteth tenderly,
 Yet none of them he rudely doth disorder,
 Ne with his feet their silken leaves deface,
 But pastures on the pleasures of each place.

And evermore, with most variety,
 And change of sweetness (for all change is sweet)
 He casts his glutton sense to satisfy,
 Now sucking of the sap of herb most meet,
 Or of the dew which yet on them doth lie,
 Now in the same bathing his tender feet;
 And then he percheth on some branch thereby
 To weather him, and his moist wings to dry.

I pass over three stanzas telling of the exquisite flowers found in the marvellous garden (by which Spenser surely symbolises his delight when he first came into the presence of the ladies of Elizabeth's court) and will only add one which I think goes to the root of his nature:

What more felicity can fall to creature
 Than to enjoy delight with liberty,
 And to be Lord of all the works of Nature,
 To reign in th' air from th' earth to highest sky,
 To feed on flowers and weeds of glorious feature,
 To take whatever thing doth please the eye?
 Who rests not pleaséd with such happiness,
 Well worthy he to taste of wretchedness.

No better picture of the voluptuous artistic temperament can be found anywhere. Yet even here we have the corrective note, distinctly Spenserian, by the side of the sensuous outburst. Clarion is no Don Juan. His

love of the beautiful may be, like the butterfly's, inconstant and changeable, but it stops short of lust. He will not "rudely disorder" the flowers he feeds upon, "nor with his feet their silken leaves deface."

Whether it is moral restraint or that extreme refinement of the artist that cannot bear to find any blemish in the object of his ecstasy, he strives to combine voluptuousness with purity. Even in this frank confession of his amorousness, he gives us a taste of that special virtue of his which Coleridge beautifully called his "maidenliness." His delicate love goes to that which is maidenly and loses all appetite for beauty spoiled and damaged. It is an easy step from this instinct to the chaste boldness of his great Platonic hymns.

"The little man with little bands and little cuffs" was not only susceptible of love. The reverse side of his sensitiveness was irritability. One may say that his most constant attitude through life was that of discontent. He very seldom shows himself pleased and satisfied. He is quick to pass sentence on persons and manners. Nearly all his work, the *Fairy Queen* included, is at bottom a satire of the present age. The poet's private deceptions, as much as his generous idealism, are responsible for that satiric vein. The two elements are so inextricably mixed up that he never appears to have been able to disentangle them, nor did he strive much perhaps to distinguish between his personal interest and the cause of virtue. He was ambitious and had to force his way to the honourable rank he finally attained, which was, however, far below his aspirations.

It is almost certain that he was of humble birth.

His father was very probably a journeyman clothier in East Smithfield. The poet felt from the beginning the desire of the moth for the star. His aspiration towards the higher spheres of life was made one with his passion for poetic fame. His wish to ascend was intimately connected with his idealism. Now in daily life everything stood in the way of his pretensions. Just fancy the tailor's son falling back from his dreams of glory to the sarcasms of the Elizabethan wits, who very foolishly had made his father's calling the butt of their jokes. Imagine the future bard of chivalry hearing them deride the tailor, who is in a way the parody of the doughty knight, with scissors instead of sword and needle instead of spear. "A tailor is a woman," "It takes nine tailors to make a man," did they keep repeating. The Renaissance comedy is full, as everyone knows, of such silly popular taunts.

The boy might distinguish himself by precocious genius in that Merchant Taylors' School where he was sent, yet he was there as one "of the poor scholars," assisted from the legacy of a town merchant, and we know he had a gown given him from the same money. Ten shillings were granted him on his departure from the school for Cambridge. There again, in his College of Pembroke Hall, he was among the poorer students, the *sizars* who then did office of servitors to the more fortunate, and paid for their board and tuition by menial service. They were employed as chapel-clerks, carriers and cooks. They made up a humiliated, sulky and discontented legion. As he wished one day to ridicule the complaints of his adversary, Thomas Nashe, Gabriel

Harvey, who had been intimate with Spenser at the university, and like him a sizar, declared that such complaints would scarcely be "beseeeming the rascaldest sizer in an university or the beggarliest mendicant friar in a country."¹ A sizar's discontent was proverbial. Spenser found himself located at respectful distance from the nobler and wealthier students, who, according to the same Harvey, were "Jack-mates and hail-fellows-well-met with their tutors . . . because forsooth they be gentlemen, or great heirs, or a little neater or gayer than their fellows."²

Spenser was surely more than once mortified by his subordinate position, being conscious of his superiority over those that the privilege of birth or money set above him. Similar mortifications drive young men to socialism in our days. In Spenser's time and in that university which was the chief seminary of the English clergy, the spirit of revolt took a religious or rather ecclesiastic turn. It is almost certain that young Spenser, when he had realised that poetry could not ensure him a means of livelihood, turned his hopes of preferment for a time towards the Church. We know that in 1578, while he was writing his first published poem, *The Shepherd's Calendar*, he was secretary to Young, Bishop of Rochester. Now this poem contains some traces of the quasi-socialistic doctrines which the student had imbibed from Cartwright at Cambridge. Cartwright even went so far as to declare war on all forms of dignity, scholastic as well as ecclesiastic, and strove to bring

¹ *G. Harvey*, edited by A. Grosart, vol. i., p. 207.

² *Ibid.*, p. 73.

back the Church to its pristine equality and simplicity of manners. The poet shows evident marks of Cartwright's influence in his *Calendar*, e.g. in his Fifth Eclogue:

The time was once, and may again retorne,
 (For aught may happen that hath been beforne)
 When Shepherds had none inheritaunce,
 Ne of land, nor fee in sufferance,
 But what might arise of the bare sheep
 (Were it more or less) which they did keep.

The Shepherds' God provided for them

Butter enough, honey, milk and whey,
 And their flocks' fleeces them to array.

But from long prosperity arose ambition and luxury. Some of the shepherds "matched themselves with mighty potentates," wherefore corruption and sloth began their reign.

The idealist in Spenser here inclines to the extreme, and seems to be in perfect agreement with the most thoroughgoing Puritans, or Mar-Prelates. It is true that this represents only a passing mood, and he saw things somewhat differently after he had been himself half engaged in the ecclesiastical career. His satire then took a less sweeping turn, but lost nothing of its sharpness. He railed against the humiliating methods by which a benefice or curacy could be obtained; he denounced the enormity of admitting slothful, unlettered parsons into the clergy, and also the encroachments of lords and ministers on the possessions and privileges of the Church. Spiritual shepherds have a precarious life,

For big Bulls of Basan brace ¹ them about
 That with their horns butten the more stout.

¹ Encompass.

He no longer dreamed of abolishing the prelacy or levelling the hierarchy, but protested against a state of things that left pure-minded, active and learned clerks like himself with no prospects of fortune. His attitude is evident from many a passage in his *Shepherd's Calendar*, and even more so in *Mother Hubbard's Tale*, part of which at least seems to have been written about the same time.

In conclusion he turned in disgust from the clergy and joyfully embraced the first opportunity that offered of becoming a courtier. No period in his life was brighter than the first year he passed in the Earl of Leicester's service, when he was about twenty-seven years old. Surely a courtier's life was better suited than a parsonage to his natural propensities, his amorousness, his love of beauty, his devotion to poetry. Yet here again the rapture was short-lived. Even in those bright days he tasted much bitterness in the bottom of his cup of nectar. How uncertain was his condition, which wholly depended on a great lord's changing humour. How unsteady the lord's favour; his promises how illusory!

Is there anything more pitiful on this earth than the state of a suitor to a prince or patron? No less than his private deceptions, Spenser's idealism revolted against the saddening realities he had before his eyes. The real courtier was so different from the ideal one described by Castiglione! The Court was a place where vice prospered better than virtue. The man of honour, impelled by a noble desire of fame, made for action or study, had no chance there. Surely Spenser had already made

many a distasteful reflection when he left Leicester's palace for Ireland.

His appointment as private secretary to Lord Grey of Wilton, Lord Lieutenant in Ireland, was no unmixed blessing. Here was his chance in life, but the price he had to pay for it was high. It was no less than exile—exile on a wild soil, among “a salvage nation.” Of his Irish experiences we hear a good deal, but more in the tone of complaint than of satisfaction. Though he rose by degrees to a high position as a landowner in Munster, he hankered after England all the time. He absolutely disapproved of all that was done by queen and ministers with regard to the sister island. Without entering into his Irish politics, let us simply state that here again his discontent is apparent. There is in fact no part of his experience in life but ran against his reason or desire.

His sensitiveness is the better shown by the suddenness with which he used to pass from joy to grief, from hope to despondency. He had the ups and downs of the poetic temperament. At every point in his career we are aware of the headlong fall from the height of some glorious dream into the depths of disillusion, the fit of anger all the more vehement for the shock he had undergone. This is best illustrated by his stay in England in 1590–1, after ten years passed in Ireland. He arrived at court under the patronage of Sir Walter Raleigh, his heart beating fast with high hopes, bringing the first three books of his *Fairy Queen* ready for the press. During the first months he basked in the favour of his sovereign, in the sunshine of fame. Everything seemed to smile to him, and he smiled back on all in return.

Queen, ladies of the court, peers, court poets, poured on him, and received from him, abundant praise. He was dazzled by the splendour of the place which contrasted so vividly with the savage island. And its outward magnificence was first interpreted as the visible garment of its inward worth. The court appeared to him the dwelling-place of all happiness and all virtue. We have the proof of it in the first 650 lines of his *Colin Clout's Come Home Again*.

But his rapture was as short-lived as it had been sudden. Kept in abeyance, soon neglected by the very courtiers who had hailed his arrival, indignant at the short memories of his patrons and the perfidious jealousy of his rivals, the poet opened his eyes to the seamy side of the gorgeous scene. The asylum of bliss turned into a rendezvous of mean intrigues, the temple of virtue into a den of debauchery. The suddenness of the change is evidenced by the same poem, the end of which flatly contradicts the beginning. The whole beautiful palace erected by his naïve enthusiasm seems to crumble to pieces before the reader's eyes. The satire is without warning substituted for the panegyric. The condemnation is as excessive as the preceding praise had been exaggerated. The nervousness of the author is obvious. He has jumped from love to hate, from admiration to scorn in the course of composition, without even taking pains to hide the inconsistency.

Yet all was not caprice and mobility in his nature. However changeable he may have been in his moods, he was a steadfast friend and a no less constant enemy.

The story of his friendships is one of the most pleasing features of his biography. Not that we find anywhere in his verse or prose the thrilling accents of Montaigne commemorating his love of La Boétie or of Shakespeare sacrificing to the young friend of the *Sonnets* his soul, his pride and his genius. There is none of that passion, none of that exquisite tenderness in Spenser. Perhaps the word friendship is not the most proper after all to describe his relation to the men of his time with whom he was connected. Apart from his fellow-students Gabriel Harvey and the more shadowy Edward Kirke, who were his equals, all the others were above him in rank and power. He stood to them rather in the relation of client to patron than of friend to friend. So it was in the case of Bishop Young, of the Earl of Leicester, of Philip Sidney, of Lord Grey of Wilton, of Sir Walter Raleigh, of Essex. The feeling manifested by him towards those men is more akin to clanship than to friendship properly so called. We would call it party-spirit in our days. But in an age when the traces of feudalism were still visible, and speaking of a man like Spenser who leaned back to the Middle Ages, perhaps the word clanship expresses the poet's attitude best of all. He appears to have been the poet of the clan into which his lot happened to be thrown and fought for its chief in bold intrepid verse. This is most evident in his relations to Leicester and Lord Grey of Wilton.

In the former instance it would be rash to speak of entire disinterestedness. Spenser was surely first drawn to Leicester by the want of a patron. He relied on the powerful earl to make his fortune. It is even hard for

us at this day to understand how the moral poet could reconcile his exorbitant praise of the earl with the (to say the least) equivocal conduct of that illustrious favourite. To the most lenient critic Leicester appears much like the unscrupulous princes of the Italian Renaissance, hiding many a black sin behind an air of magnificence. Such was the man who was to be transfigured by the poet as the hero of heroes, the all-virtuous Knight Arthur. Now, in the true spirit of clanship, Spenser had no hesitation about his duty. He had to fight to the death for his patron, without investigating into his deeds and notions. Did he not write to Harvey when on the eve of being sent by Leicester to the Continent:

"I goe thither, as sent by him, and maintained most what of him: and there am to employ my time, my body, my mind, to his Honour's service."

Leicester's family had full claim to his poetical homage, and thus it was that he composed the *Stemmata Dudleiana* that were to be englished afterwards as *The Ruins of Time*. Leicester's foes necessarily became Spenser's foes, and therefore did the poet engage in his lifelong duel with the Lord High Treasurer, the mighty Earl of Burleigh—a daring fight of the light pinnace against the bulky man-of-war, wherein the poor poet could but receive the hardest blows and mar his future prospects. Yet once launched into the battle he struggled to the end, even long after Leicester's death, always singling out Burleigh as the chief target for his sharp satire. Had not he been in his youth accepted into the opposite clan? In an age of compromise, the

firm attachment of the poet to his dead patron moved the admiration of Florio, who wrote in 1591 (in the Epistle Dedicatory of his *Second Fruits*):

“Courteous Lord, courteous Spenser, I know not which hath purchased more fame, either he in deserving so well of a schollar, or so famous a Schollar in being so thankful without hope of requital, to so famous a Lord, who dying left all artes as orphans, forsaken and friendless.”

We find the same devotion, but this time without any blot, in the poet's attachment to Lord Grey of Wilton. Spenser became his secretary at the outset of his stay in Ireland; of his politics he entirely approved and made them his own; and when Grey had been recalled and his stern policy as a governor was condemned by the queen, Spenser continued to extol it. We have here a proof that Spenser's friendship could not only survive his personal interest but even gainsay it. He never failed to vindicate the government of Grey under his successors nor to accuse his enemies, though accredited by the Sovereign, of injustice and ignorance. Moreover, wherever he considers the case of his revered and unfortunate patron, we catch an accent of generous indignation.

So far we have noticed a certain variety of elements in Spenser's character, all easily reconcilable however, all more or less related either to his sensitiveness or his innate idealism. They are natural to the make-up of the poetic temperament. But other aspects remain, and these constrain us to admit that his nature was

indeed complex, for they are opposed to the poetical and idealistic. Spenser also had, or believed he had, the qualities of the practical man.

It is a fact that in his correspondence with Harvey he gives himself out as a prudent and wary youth who flies from all extremes. His motto is *Cautela superabundans non nocet* ("One can never be too cautious"). He rebukes Harvey for his unbending stoicism, for his absolute scorn of love and all worldly goods. He would have his friend comply at times with the multitude. True wisdom is at equal distance from all excess—"In medio superest via gurgite," as he expresses it in his Latin. He himself is determined to do all that is necessary to succeed in this world. The House of Temperance, which he describes in the Second Book of his *Fairy Queen*, is the dwelling-place for him, or rather the Palace of Golden Mean, inhabited by the three sisters Medina, Perissa and Elissa. He condemns both Perissa, who is "too much," and Elissa, who is "too little." On the contrary, Medina, who personifies the Golden Mean, is his ideal. He equally reproves the lawless knight Sansloi and the sour puritan Sir Hudibras.

We have seen how sharp a satirist he was, how vehemently he railed at the society of his times. But he takes care to see that his satire is harmless to its own author. As a courtier, though he blames the manners of the place, he adopts its ways so far as needs be to make sure of a hearing. He spares no flattery to make amends for his assaults. No one has more carefully studied the art of flattery. When in Leicester's household, he cautiously feels the ground before deciding

how best to pay his court to the great earl. Of course, as a poet he might lay siege to his favours by praises and dedications. But this, says he, ought to be done with the utmost circumspection. Would it be wise to dedicate his *Shepherd's Calendar* to Leicester? He wonders whether it would not be better policy to keep silent for a time. He thus describes his hesitations to Harvey:

"I was minded for a while to have intermitted the uttering of my writings, lest by over much cloying their noble ears, I should gather a contempt to myself, or else seem rather for gain and commodity to do it, for some sweetness that I have already tasted. Then also, meseemeth, the work too base for his excellent Lordship, . . . or the matter not so weighty that it should be offered to so weighty a Personage. . . ."

In the same letter he ponders on the foolishness of Stephen Goss on inscribing his *School of Abuse* or denunciation of the poets to Philip Sidney, a poet and lover of poetry:

"Such folly it is not to regard aforehand the inclination and quality of him to whom we dedicate our Books. Such might I happily incur entituling my *Slumber* and the other pamphlets unto his Honour (i.e. Leicester)."

Thus is he led by degrees to more and more refinement or excess in his praise; thus he finally makes Leicester the hero of his *Fairy Queen* and adumbrates him as Arthur, the type of magnificence. All the common panegyrists of the earl are left far behind. The cloyed ears are opened to strains new and unmatchable.

Much of the same prudence is seen even in what proved to be the rashest act of his courtier's life—his attacks against Lord Burleigh. It is to be noticed that he began them when sheltered by Leicester and surely with the certainty of pleasing his patron. It is true that he miscalculated the relative power of the two rivals. True also that he could not foresee that Leicester was to die first and leave him unprotected. But then he tried a clever manœuvre which partly succeeded. He began to pit the queen herself against her Lord Treasurer. Every one of his attacks upon Burleigh was henceforth made under cover of praise of Elizabeth.

Now what the poet thought of his sovereign in the secret of his heart is difficult to say. Most biographers of Spenser take it for granted that his loyalty to the queen was part of his worship of all women; that his poetical imaginations really carried him away when he addressed her; that she was to him no less than a sainted being at the mere thought of whom he lost all self-control, all faculty of criticism, all common sense.

It is perfectly true that she is everywhere in his works: a queen of May, a queen of Fairy, Eliza, Gloriana, Belphebe, Britomart, both Diana and Venus, the ideal sovereign, the ideal woman. She is the deity before whom his stanzas will bow down in humble devotion. It is impossible to imagine a single attribute of beauty, virtue or power that is wanting to the picture. Eternal youth blooms on her face. Though she is no less than forty-six when he first portrays her, she is presented as the lovely youthful queen of all shepherds and shepherdesses. The white and red roses mix their colours on

her cheeks. Such is the radiance of her beauty that Phœbus, having put forth his golden head to see her, is all abashed. He becomes red with envy at the sight and draws back his head for fear of a comparison that would show his inferiority. Yet the splendour of her soul exceeds and eclipses the charms of her features. She is the flower of virgins, the daughter of Pan, King of Shepherds, i.e. Henry VIII., and of blameless Syrinx, i.e. Ann Boleyn. These are only a few features of the portrait drawn of her in Eclogue IV., so lavish of colours and hyperboles. Yet it is by far the simplest of the many likenesses of Elizabeth that we owe to the poet.

For as she grew older, the queen exacted more and more praise, just as she covered her face more deeply in rouge and white to hide the ravages of time, till at the last she became a sort of oriental idol frightful to behold. Besides, her courtiers vied with one another at sending up the sweetest-scented incense into her royal nostrils. Spenser had to take into account the extravagant descriptions of Elizabeth in Lily's *Euphues and his England*, which, after a number of surprising conceits, ended in an almost blasphemous declaration of her deity:

Divisum Elizabeth cum Jove numen habet.
(She divides the empire with God.)

For these reasons, in his *Colin Clout's Come Home Again*, written when Elizabeth was nearly sixty, some thirteen or fourteen years after the *Calendar*, the poet went to the extreme of lyrical madness either in the praise of her physical beauty or in his gratitude for a

pension she had granted him. To tell of her munificence, he lays Solomon's Song under contribution for Asiatic images. He has recourse to the most absurd conceits of the Pastoral to vent his thankfulness. He will inscribe her name on the trees, he will design it on the turf with stones. He will have it repeated by his lambs:

And eke my lambs, when for their dams they call,
I'll teach to call for Cynthia by name.

Did the queen truly appear to Spenser's eyes as he has represented her? Did he see in her ageing cheeks that complexion of lilies and roses? Was he convinced at heart that the royal coquette who publicly took such strange liberties with her favourites was the pattern of chastity? Did her court seem to him the temple of virtues? Was she the miracle of wisdom that he extolled? the benefactress of her kingdom? the upholder of religion, of letters and arts? Was he indeed so much dazzled by her greatness that his eyes denied their office of truthfulness in her presence? Was there a strain of naïve, ingenuous sincerity at the bottom of all his flattery?

After weighing everything well, and taking Spenser's chivalry and patriotism into due account, such blindness seems improbable. All Spenser's work shows him to be a discontented man, convinced of the decay of the times, of the ill-administration of his country, of the corruption of its political men and clergy. In his eyes, moreover, it was an age of iron for letters and poetry. One can scarcely name a single act of the queen's Government which did not rouse his protests, stir him to wrath and indignation—real, downright

indignation. This was so from the beginning and lasted all his life. And at the last, in the Fifth Book of his *Fairy Queen*, he was to vent his rancour against "the Regiment of Women," and call it contrary to the decree of God and the laws of Nature.

One cannot help noticing that his encomiums of the queen are in direct proportion to the virulence of his attacks against her reign. Of course he shifts the weight of his railings from off her person to lay it on the shoulders of her minister, Burleigh, who assumes in his poems the character of an evil genius, bearing most of the brunt. But he could not be ignorant of the source of Burleigh's power:

Ma faveur fait ta gloire et ton pouvoir en vient;
Elle seule t'élève et seule te soutient.

Obviously Spenser used his panegyrics to cover his assaults. They are part of that worldly prudence with which he showed himself so well provided in his letters to Harvey. He did not paint the queen as he knew she was, but as she liked to be painted, and he justified the enormous lie to himself by considering her as a mere figure-head of an ideal England, an ideal femininity.

That the poets' poet was in many respects a practical man, by no means unable to cope with crabbed and even ugly problems of his day, we have a different—and less controvertible—proof in his *View of the Present State of Ireland*, a pamphlet much in the vein of Machiavelli, which might have won full praise from the notorious Florentine historian. Whatever we may think of the system of pacification recommended by Spenser, of the conquest by sword and famine that he advocates,

he shows himself a keen observer of men and customs throughout the book; he aims at efficiency; he never lets himself be disturbed by imagination or feeling. He appears as a close reasoner whose arguments are based on facts and experience, whose plans are developed by means of statistics. Surely, we have here the work of a clear-minded, cool-tempered man of action.

Yet, even here the idealist may still be detected. He betrays himself by his very pitilessness; are not often idealists, when they have to deal with human problems, the most unfeeling of men? With their eyes lifted up to the glorious vision that shines in the distance they will run towards it, never caring if they must cut their way through poor suffering human flesh. To purify Ireland from its evils, Spenser would not have hesitated to exterminate the natives. Do not imagine, however, that he utters such ideas with the passion and vehemence of a fanatic. He remains collected and dignified all through. The contrast between the mercilessness of his schemes and the well-bred elegance of his style is perhaps the most characteristic feature of his pamphlet. The thoroughness of his politics was not at all extraordinary for the time, but they seldom found such a gentlemanly, courteous expression. The epithet "courteous" clings as naturally to Spenser's name as "kindly" clings to Chaucer's or "sweet" to Shakespeare's.

It is time for us to make a sketch of Spenser the man with the help of these scattered and perhaps contradictory materials. The little man with little cuffs was a noble-minded Renaissance scholar, infinitely susceptible to

love and beauty. The artistic temperament, with its delicacy, its irritability too, was strong in him. His nervousness made him liable to alternate fits of rapture and dejection. He was prone to identify his interests with the cause of virtue. He never seems to have had those self-questionings and self-suspensions which are the foundations of tolerance and the springs of genial humour. The contrast between his high ideals and the real world he lived in made him a sharp critic of men and manners. Yet he was ambitious to rise in the society of which he disapproved; he yearned after the good things of a world which he despised. Thus it is that we find in him both worldliness and other-worldliness. No poet was more of a courtier and had a keener sense of the vanity of a courtier's life.

But, after all, Spenser's character has only secondary importance for the student of his work. The key to his poetry must be looked for in his imaginings. His greatest verse is almost impersonal, or at any rate is a record of his dreams rather than of his doings.

CHAPTER II

HIS IDEAS, MORAL AND RELIGIOUS

THOUGH there is perhaps more of the autobiographical element in Spenser's poetry than is generally supposed, it is nevertheless much less representative of what he did than of what he thought or imagined. And this is truest of his most famous writings. He presents a picture, not of the world as he saw it with his bodily eye, but rather as he wished it to be. He did not sympathise with the present and he fled away from it to a dreamland where his ideal of the good and beautiful found deeper satisfaction.

That he was a religious and moral-minded writer is obvious from his poems. He never wrote anything that did not aim at edification. In his *Shepherd's Calendar* religion fills nearly as much space as love. His *Complaints* are full of denunciations of the sins and errors of mortal men; they seek to turn human minds from earthly vanities to the contemplation of things eternal. His *Fairy Queen*, when we read the plan of the poem, i.e. the introductory letter of Spenser to Sir Walter Raleigh, claims to be as good as a sermon. Is it not the general end of the whole work "to fashion a gentleman or noble person in virtuous and gentle discipline"?

The moral aim is everywhere so much obtruded on the reader that several critics have, in their study of

Spenser, given the foremost place to the ideas of the poet, and treated him as a moralist or as a Christian philosopher. They are perfectly justified in doing so by the poet's own example and invitation, but they have failed to notice that his true poetry is distinct from his moralising, that the two are often in direct conflict, that they very seldom succeed in melting harmoniously into one another. This conflict endured throughout Spenser's life and is perhaps the most striking feature of it. He was born to be inspired by an enthusiasm for earthly and physical beauty, yet the more ascetic spirit of Christianity was constantly calling upon him to renounce such vanities.

The contradiction is apparent from the outset, but Spenser does not seem to have been conscious of it at first, and was never wholly conscious of it at any time. He really believed he was assuring the triumph of religion and giving its defenders the best of moral arguments; he never realised that his poetry might equally well appeal to the ears of the irreligious. This can be exemplified by his Fifth Eclogue between the shepherds Pierce and Palinode. Pierce is a true austere shepherd (i.e. a clergyman), wholly devoted to the welfare of his flock, endeavouring to lead himself a pure, unsensual, godly life, and turn those committed to his care from all worldly thoughts and interests, from all frivolous pleasures and follies.

Palinode, on the contrary, a sort of prefiguration of Robert Herrick, or of the Vicar of Bray, is an easy-going shepherd, full of sympathy for the half-pagan festivities of the age; he wishes to join the lads and

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girls that go out a-maying and would induce Pierce to join them too.

Spenser, of course, wants us to approve and reverence Pierce, as well as condemn Palinode, with the odious name. Yet it so happens that the eclogue would be dull and prosaic, were it not for Palinode's description of the May festivity. This opening part of the poem is the only one that strikes us as truly poetical. It is lively and delightful, full of colour and charm, and we feel that, will he nill he, the poet here is at one with Palinode:

Palinode

Is not thilke the merry month of May
When love-lads masken in fresh array?
How falls it, then, we no merrier been,
Ylike as others, girt in gaudy green?
Our blonket ¹ liveries been all too sad
For thilk same season, when all is iclad
With pleasance: the ground with grass, the woods
With green leaves, the bushes with blossoming buds.
Youths folk now flocken in everywhere,
To gather May buskets ² and smelling brere,
And home they hasten the posts to dight
And all the Kirk pillars ere day light,
With Hawthorn buds and sweet Eglantine,
And garlands of Roses, and Sopps-in-wine;
Such merrymake holy Saints doth queme,³
But we here sitten as drowned in a dream.

Pierce

For younkers, Palinode, such follies fit,
But we tway been men of older wit.

Palinode

Sicker, this morrow, no longer ago,
I saw a shole of shepherds outgo

¹ Grey cloth.

² Bushes.

³ Please.

With singing, and shouting, and jolly chere:
 Before them yode a lusty Tabrere,
 That to the many a Horn-pipe playd,
 Where to they dauncen, each one with his maid.
 To see those folks make such jovysance,
 Made my heart after the pipe to dance;
 Tho to the green wood they speeden them all,
 To fetchen home May with their musical;
 And home they bringen in a royal throne,
 Crowned as king: and his Queen atone
 Was Lady Flora, on whom did attend
 A fair flock of Fairies, and a fresh bend
 Of lovely Nymphs. (O that I were there
 To helpen the Ladies their Maybush bear!)

Ah! Pierce, been not thy teeth on edge, to think
 How great sport they gainen with little swink?

All that Pierce utters in answer is but dull prose by the side of that rich burst of poetry.

Here we have the earliest proof that Spenser the poet was not at one with Spenser the moralist—that his genius, so to say, ran against his reason or his faith. From an historical point of view, nothing can be more interesting than verses like these. They transport us back to the time when the Renaissance and Reform were at war in society as a whole, and in each individual too. In almost every soul of the age there was a Savonarola fighting against an Ariosto or a Titian. The tragedy in Spenser's case, for it is scarcely less than a tragedy, was that he had to say *nay* to his very genius. He was born to sing May festivities or build enchanting Bowers of Bliss. All he could do to quiet his conscience was, after raising those beautiful structures, to declare them immoral or impious, but he was too much delighted with them to suppress them altogether, and his Muse very seldom prompted the Christian in him to lyrical or descriptive flights of equal beauty.

Are we to conclude that no purely spiritual poetry can possibly be so moving and beautiful as the other? By no means. The next age, the seventeenth century, abounds in poets, whether Puritan, Anglican or Catholic, who sound truly religious notes, and these of great charm or sublimity—Giles Fletcher, Milton, Marvell, Herbert, Vaughan, Crashaw, and many more.

But Spenser, after all, had little of the mystic in him, or of the religious champion. His religious fervour was superficial rather than deep, more concerned with outward problems than with the intimate spirit of Christianity. One finds but few traces of direct communion with Christ in him. The spirit of the Gospel is mostly absent from his verse. He has much less of it than his master Chaucer himself, though the latter was, generally speaking, a hearty convivial companion, with a touch of the sceptic about him. Even when Spenser remembers Chaucer's description of "his good parson of a town" and takes it for his pattern, he fails to catch the exquisite suavity and winning accent of that beautiful character. He nowhere gives us an equivalent of the charitable zeal, the humility and kindness, the self-sacrifice, the meek imitation of Christ, that invest the simple fourteenth-century priest with such unspeakable charm.

The very passage which is usually invoked as proof of Spenser's high seriousness and earnest religious inspiration is the opening of the eighth canto of the Second Book of his *Fairy Queen*:

And is there care in Heaven? . . .

The first two stanzas are indeed beautiful. With a

lyrical *élan* of great suggestive power, the poet praises God's bounty to men. God sends His angels to the assistance of "these creatures base," of "wicked man," of his "wicked foe." The angels do their office "all for love, and nothing for reward."

O why should heavenly God to men have such regard?

The vision of the blessed angels who leave "their silver bowers" and cleave the flitting skies with golden pinions, "like flying Pursuivant," has a glory about it. But the passage loses much of its seriousness through irrelevancy. The supposed "wicked foe" of God happens to be, here, Sir Guyon, the champion of Temperance, who has just passed victoriously through the most awful ordeal. He has been assailed by Mammon with all the temptations of wealth and power. The demon has shown him in his subterranean kingdom untold heaps of gold, enough to ensure him absolute sovereignty over the earth. He has offered him the hand of his daughter, beautiful Philotime, coveted by all the ambitious of this world. But Guyon has remained deaf to every temptation. He has proved a sage and a saint, withstanding Mammon's entreaties, as Christ withstood Satan's offers in the wilderness. If he faints as he regains the upper air, it is merely through bodily exhaustion. His soul has not wavered a single instant in its loyalty to virtue. He truly deserves a crown. What has he in common with the "creatures base" to whom God shows His infinite mercy by saving and rescuing them from their baseness? Such utter contradiction between the occasion and the lyrical outburst of humble

gratitude, imparts to the passage, in spite of its apparent sincerity, a falsetto note which cannot but spoil the effect for the truly serious reader.

On the other hand, Spenser is seldom like the greater Puritans, like Bunyan for instance, anguished and tormented by the horror of sin, by the fear of being one of the reprobates. A famous passage in the First Book of the *Fairy Queen* may of course be invoked as proof that the Calvinistic anguish of soul was not unknown to or unfelt by Spenser. I am thinking of the powerful scene in the Cave of Despair, when the Red-Cross Knight, haunted by the memory of his transgressions, nearly falls into the clutches of the demon, who murmurs into his ear that he is now beyond all hope of salvation. But even this episode, when closely examined, appears an inextricable mixture of Christian and pagan thoughts. It is a discussion on suicide, not from the merely profane point of view of Hamlet's monologue, it is true, but not entirely from the Christian's either. To the question—Has a man a right to commit suicide?—the negative answer is in Plato's own words and images. Moreover, the despair here described, while in part the despair of a Christian who has sinned and fears damnation, is also (especially in the finest stanzas) a picture of the *tædium vitæ*, of the weariness of life. And Giant Despair speaks at times like the ancient Sirens pleading for rest:

Who travels by the weary wandering way,
To come unto his wished home in haste,
And meets a flood that doth his passage stay,
Is not great grace to help him over past,
Or free his feet that in the mire stick fast?

Most envious man, that grieves at neighbour's good,
 And fond, that joyest in the woe thou hast!
 Why wilt not let him pass, that long hath stood
 Upon the bank, yet wilt thyself not pass the flood?

He there does now enjoy eternal rest
 And happy ease, which thou dost want and crave
 And further from it daily wanderest:
 What if some little pain the passage have,
 That makes frail flesh to fear the bitter wave,
 Is not short pain well borne, that brings long ease,
 And lays the soul to sleep in quiet grave?
 Sleep after toil, port after stormy seas,
 Ease after war, death after life, does greatly please.

It is evident that the Bible was never foremost among the books that Spenser read, or at any rate that it was not the greatest influence in his poetry. Where biblical teaching is his aim, it is overlaid by Ovid or Ariosto, by Plato or Aristotle. Besides, when he really deals with the religious problems of his day, he is mostly concerned with questions of morality and discipline. He has heard too much of the Cambridge controversies about Luther and Calvin, Rome and Geneva, for or against the hierarchy, for or against the wearing of caps and surplises. His thought scarcely ever soars above such temporal discussions to attain the heavenly sphere. In the *Shepherd's Calendar* he is more of a sectarian, more of a Protestant than a Christian pure and simple. Under the guise of religious verse, he mostly gives us ecclesiastical controversy.

Even in this controversial mood, when he declares himself the most decided champion of Reform against the Papacy, the conflict between his imagination (which is steeped in the past) and his half-Puritan faith is most disconcerting. Though averse to the beliefs of the

Middle Ages, which to his eyes were only superstition and idolatry, in poetic feeling Spenser remained Catholic to the core. He could never body forth his visions in symbols other than those which had been bequeathed him from pre-Reformation times. What is his *Fairy Queen* if not a revival of the old chivalric epoch, with its costume, its symbols and its rites?

Thus it is that Una, in whom he personifies pure reformed religion, is clad like a nun, and the Red Cross Knight himself, the champion of Protestantism, is an embodiment of Saint George; that the House of Holiness exactly resembles a monastery, wherein we meet Patience arrayed in ashes and sackcloth, and Penance with an iron whip for flagellation, and the seven Beadsmen, and the hermit Contemplation—so many remnants of what he and his friends would have called the abhorred Popish practices.

His *Shepherd's Calendar* affords equally striking instances of that antithesis between his imagination and his practical faith. The notes added to the poem by Edward Kirke (which at least were read and approved, if not dictated by Spenser himself) show that he could in his cooler moods make light of the very elements that were food and substance to his poetry. Here Kirke calls the authors of the Arthurian romance "loud liars." Elsewhere he inveighs against the popular belief in elves and fairies; he ascribes those superstitions to "a sort of bald Friars and knavish shavelings" who, says he, "as in all other things, so in that, sought to nousle [nurse] the common people in ignorance, lest, being once acquainted with the truth of things, they

would in time smell out the untruth of this packed pelf and mass-penny religion." Does not this contempt for Arthurian legend and the fairies sound strange in the man who was about the same time founding his masterpiece on the history of Arthur and the myths of Fairyland?

The fact is that his poetic appetite for the beautiful and the picturesque had the better of his reason. He glorified in his verse what he detested as a sectarian.

Spenser deceived himself when he entered the lists as a reformer. Thoroughly dissatisfied with the present and without much hope in the future, surely he found his delight in the contemplation of the past. Never had man more steadfast belief in the superiority of the past over the present, never more constant longing for the age of gold. He believed that virtue had once established its dominion over a world which had only degenerated ever since.

Of this the proofs abound, both in his more familiar outpourings and in his elaborate disquisitions in verse. We hear of a letter he wrote to Gabriel Harvey in 1580, in which the young poet spoke like an old man, "*laudator temporis acti*." The letter is lost, but we know its contents through Harvey's reply, which appears to be the language of common sense. Harvey mockingly answers that to find the age of gold one has to go very far back indeed into history, surely beyond the time of Sodom and the Tower of Babel, even beyond the time of Cain. Through Harvey's heavy taunts we learn what some of Spenser's arguments had been: nowadays, said Spenser, contrary to the usage of past ages, reason is enslaved

to the appetites, it is the tool of fancy; sensual pleasures are no longer subordinated to the inward joys of contemplation.

In spite of Harvey's raillery, Spenser holds to his view, the more so as he firmly believes that the past was also the golden age for poets and poetry. Already, in his Ninth Eclogue of the *Shepherd's Calendar*, he had said that the times of the Roman Tityrus (i.e. Virgil) are now over, that there are no longer any great patrons of literature, like Mecænas or Augustus, and the heroes of yore have disappeared together with the poets who sang their praise. Virtue is now decayed, honour shut up in an ignoble prison; of poetry nothing is left but licentious and coarse rimes; it is without a shelter; it cannot even find protection in the Prince's Palace—nothing is left for it but to leave the earth and fly back to its native sky.

We find the same doctrine inculcated at length in the *Tears of the Muses*, in 1591. This is a long lamentation concerning the wretched condition of letters and arts, each Muse coming forth on the scene in turn to bewail her misery. Spenser is so far from perceiving the glory of his own age that he makes Thalia and Melpomene, the Muses of Comedy and Tragedy, weep over the degeneracy of the stage just at the time (1591) when they were beginning their wonderful career, when Shakespeare's predecessors, Marlowe included, had already written part of their work, when Shakespeare himself was composing his early dramas.

Later on, in the Proem to the Fifth Book of his *Fairy Queen*, Spenser returns to this theme and dwells

on it with unwearied complacency. The decay of Justice is what he chiefly deplores in these stanzas:

So oft as I with state of present time
The image of the antique world compare,
When as man's age was in his freshest prime,
And the first blossom of fair virtue bare;
Such odds I find twixt those and these which are,
As that, through long continuance of his course,
Me seems the world is run quite out of square
From the first point of his appointed source,
And being once amiss grows daily worse and worse;

For from the golden age that first was named,
It's now at earst become a stony one;
And men themselves, the which at first were framed
Of earthly mould, and form'd of flesh and bone,
Are now transform'd into hardest stone. . . .

Let none then blame me, if in discipline
Of virtue and of civil uses lore,
I do not form them to the common line
Of present days, which are corrupted sore,
But to the antique use which was of yore,
When good was only for itself desired,
And all men sought their own, and none no more;
When Justice was not for most meed out-hired,
But simple Truth did reign, and was of all admired.

And the poet goes on in the same strain for many stanzas. It may be said that he merely repeats here very ancient reveries on the age of gold already found in Ovid and many others. That he echoes them is admitted. But he is not a mere echo. He has made those rhetorical disquisitions his own. They are present everywhere in his works. His *Complaints*, especially the *Visions of the World's Vanity*, are full of the same melancholy, of the monotonous description of things falling from a prosperous state into ruin and decay.

It is impossible, then, to call this a poetical fiction

used for mere ornament. It is a deep-seated creed, the foundation upon which his poetry was built. His imagination conspired with his private resentments when conjuring up that beautiful image of times long ago. In the great controversy between Ancients and Moderns which was already beginning and was to grow all through the next century, Spenser, without a moment's hesitation, took sides with the Ancients. He did not yield to the authority of Jean Bodin, which Harvey invoked against him. According to Jean Bodin, "it is now that the age of gold flourishes. Our great-great-grandfathers had to plod heavily through the ages of iron and bronze, when all things were rude and imperfect by comparison with the refinement and delicacy of the present day." Thus spoke Bodin. But Spenser would not have it so. Neither had he any inkling of the ideas already maturing in the mind of young Bacon which were to culminate in the famous apophthegm: "*Antiquitas mundi juvenus sæculi.*"

Spenser did not recognise any progress or improvement in the universe. Hence his hatred of the great titanic power he calls Mutability. Mutability, that is to say, Change, is the scourge of the world, for its road is strewn with the ruins of all that was ever good and great:

For she the face of earthly things so changed
That all which Nature had establisht first
In good estate, and in meet order ranged,
She did pervert, and all their statutes burst:
And all the world's fair frame (which none yet durst
Of gods or men to alter or misguide)
She alter'd quite; and made them all accurst
That God had blest, and did at first provide
In that still happy state for ever to abide.

That Mutability might be a power exerted for the good of mankind was an idea which never occurred to Spenser. A kind of inborn melancholy, nurtured by ill-health and strengthened by many a deception in his career, made him an incurable malcontent. He was driven to take refuge now in the world of chimeras, now in fairyland, now in pastoral and allegory, and to fly from a world where he saw injustice, corruption, intrigue, ignorance, sloth and misery triumphing beyond all remedy on this side of eternity.

It is to Spenser's credit that he made a bold attempt to harmonise the antagonistic forces which, as we have seen, possessed his soul, and caused the clash between his poetry and his moral and religious principles. He wanted to justify his innate love of all earthly beauty, and above all, his passion for woman, which was the most fascinating form of beauty given him to contemplate here below. This he could only do by identifying the beautiful with the virtuous, and for this the Christian doctrine gave him no authority. But Plato here came to his help—Plato and the Christian Platonists of the Renaissance. A great effort had been made in Italy to purify and christianise the desire for the beautiful which reigned in that age with irresistible power, and had raised the plastic arts to an extraordinary height of splendour. While Savonarola wished to suppress and destroy all the artistic and literary productions of the Renaissance as pagan and profane, while artists and poets, on the other hand, indulged in all forms of voluptuous and sensual excess, there were a few, equally

removed from asceticism and debauchery, who aimed at reconciling the hostile principles of Christianity and paganism, of human and divine love, of earthly and spiritual beauty. Foremost among them had been Ficino in the second half of the fifteenth century. His eloquent commentaries on Plato's *Convivium* furnished all his successors with the philosophy they needed. This philosophy, neither strictly Christian nor strictly Platonic, but a curious combination of the two, grew out of the Platonic idea that all beauty in material things is spiritual, that it is of divine essence, so that the love of beauty is no other than the love of God Himself. All true love is religious. All beauty is or ought to be celestial.

Spenser simply follows Plato through Ficino or, perhaps, Giordano Bruno. He invents nothing. All that is peculiar to him is that he makes beauty signify the beauty of woman. This restriction is his only contribution to the substance of the doctrine. But its form he translated into the splendid verse we find in many a passage scattered through all his poems and, above all, in his magnificent *Hymns*. His eloquence here proves with what enthusiasm he grasped that welcome creed. For did it not offer him the only compromise possible between his sensualism and his idealism? Thus was desire identified with sanctity. Thus was he able, whenever he admired a beautiful face, to say to himself that he was rendering homage to a virtuous soul made visible to the bodily eye. To love a fair woman was a delightful way of glorifying God. Every one knows the great stanzas by which he expressed that conceit in his *Hymns*, especially in his *Hymn in Honour of Beauty*.

He protests against the current idea that beauty, i.e. womanly beauty, can be accounted for by mere "mixture of colours" or "comely composition of parts well measured." No, "white and red" have no such power. "Proportion of the outward part" is unable to stir the passion of love in the heart. If it were so, the blossoms of the field, arrayed in much brighter colours, or the fair pictures which excel in perfection of outline, would stir the soul to the same enthusiasm, which they do not. The reason is that womanly beauty is not "an outward show of things that only seem." The material elements of that beauty will pass away:

For that same goodly hew of white and red
With which the cheeks are sprinkled, shall decay,
And those sweet rosy leaves, so fairly spread
Upon the lips, shall fade and fall away
To that they were, even to corrupted clay:
That golden wire, those sparkling stars so bright,
Shall turn to dust and lose their goodly light.

But the essence of beauty, the beautiful soul, shall never die. Before the body lived, the soul had life; it will fly back to its native planet after leaving the bodily tenement. From that heavenly dwelling-place it had come down to earth and framed to itself an habitation worthy of its spiritual splendour. Hence the bold conclusion:

Thereof it comes that these fair souls, which have
The most resemblance of that heavenly light,
Frame to themselves most beautiful and brave
Their fleshly bower, most fit for their delight,
And the gross matter by a sovereign might
Tempers so trim, that it may well be seen
A palace fit for such a virgin Queen.

So every spirit, as it is most pure,
And hath in it the more of heavenly light,
So it the fairer body doth procure
To habit in, and it more fairly dight
With cheerful grace and amiable sight;
For of the soul the body form doth take;
For soul is form, and doth the body make.

Therefore wherever that thou dost behold
A comely corpse, with beauty fair endued,
Know this for certain, that the same doth hold
A beauteous soul, with fair conditions thowed,
Fit to receive the seed of virtue strewed;
For all that fair is, is by nature good;
That is a sign to know the gentle blood.

Never have beauty and virtue been identified in such bold language, with such defiance of experience, as in these stanzas. In one of his *Popular Fallacies*, Charles Lamb was to make fun of Spenser's assertion and protest in the name of a certain Mrs. Conrady who happened to combine the most singular ugliness with the practice of the highest virtues, with absolute kindness, purity and self-sacrifice. Spenser himself could not altogether ignore the objections raised by common sense and experience. He admitted that "many a gentle mind dwells in deformed tabernacle," and, on the other hand, "that goodly beauty, albeit heavenly born, is foul abused" and "made the bait of sin." But he laid the blame on those who abused beauty, not on beauty itself, and his unperturbed faith went so far as to declare:

Natheless the soul is fair and beauteous still,
However flesh fault it filthy make;
For things immortal no corruption take.

The lamentable exception, according to him, only confirmed the rule, and it may be said that his Platonism remained unshaken through almost all his life.

It is true that when he first published his *Hymns in Honour of Love and Beauty* in 1596, he apologised for them, saying he had composed them "in the greener times" of his youth, and confessing that the young, when reading them, "do rather suck out poison to their strong passion than honey to their honest delight." It is also true that he added on two other hymns by way of antidote, one of Heavenly Love and the other of Heavenly Beauty. But these later hymns only give another aspect of the same Platonism, and lay the stress on the heavenly, as opposed to the earthly, elements in beauty and love. The publication of the erotic together with the religious odes is also rather suspicious. It is an admission of imperfect conversion, incomplete repentance. Indeed, we can safely assume that all Spenser's poetry is grounded on his Neoplatonic belief.

And it is equally true that this same belief is the belief essential to all artists and poets. Spenser has only given bolder and more eloquent expression than others to a comforting and inspiring creed: one that gives man full liberty to follow his instincts and call his joy by the same name as his duty. This is perhaps the main reason why Spenser has been called the poets' poet. True poets will always echo him. So Shakespeare in *Love's Labour's Lost*, when he makes Biron proclaim that love is the best inspirer of wisdom, that the best of all knowledge is to be gathered from women's eyes:

They are the ground, the books, the academes
From whence doth spring the true Promethean fire.

Shelley is to live with this ideal perpetually present

to his mind. Keats only alters Spenser's doctrine by substituting truth for virtue:

Beauty is Truth, Truth, Beauty.

Even the graver Wordsworth is to confess that such a faith is his faith, or was so in his truly poetical days, or will be for the whole world when it has outgrown its present imperfect state. He addresses Duty in these words:

Serene will be our days and bright,
And happy will our nature be,
When love is an unerring light,
And joy its own security.
And they a blissful course may hold
Even now, who, not unwisely bold,
Live in the spirit of this creed;
Yet seek thy firm support, according to their need.

Thanks to this faith, Spenser embellishes all his loves, from first to last. He transfigures into angels all the women he loves, calls all his lover's emotions heavenward aspirations. He also feels justified as an artist in following his natural bent, the promptings of his special genius—that is to say, he revels in gorgeous description of all the beautiful forms and colours which have enchanted his eyes in the pageant of life.

This borrowed Platonism is the only philosophy that deserves notice in Spenser's works. And in so far as it is moral, it is also the only moral doctrine that Spenser sings with a note of fervour in his voice. The rest of his moralising is mere convention—it is trite, tame, shallow, nerveless. Few modern readers can agree with Milton, who declared Spenser "a better teacher than Scotus and Aquinas," or with Professor Dowden, who spoke

of his *Fairy Queen* as "an armour for the soul." Hazlitt, the king of critics, was better inspired when he said that the mainspring of Spenser's mind "was beauty, not truth." Spenser is nothing if not an artist after all. No thinker, no truly philosophic mind, would have ventured, as he did, to proclaim so many truisms in such sonorous language. He is supreme in tautology. He can take the whole of one solemn stanza to tell us that temperance is the reverse of intemperance:

Who ever doth to temperance apply
His steadfast life and all his actions frame,
Trust me, shall find no greater enemy
Than stubborn perturbation to the same;
To which right well the wise do give that name,
For it the goodly peace of stayèd minds
Does overthrow and troublous war proclaim. . . .
Fairy Queen, II. v. 1.

Or he will gravely explain that change is the effect of mutability:

What man that sees the ever-whirling wheel
Of Change, the which all mortal things doth sway,
But that thereby doth find, and plainly feel
How Mutability in them doth play
Her cruel sports in many men's decay?
Fairy Queen, VII. vi. 1.

The poet who contented himself with such definitions, surely devoted but little time and energy to abstract thought when composing his masterpiece. It is to be questioned whether he coined a single new maxim, bearing the personal mark, or went deeper than the surface into any moral problem. He wrote beautifully harmonious verse and painted magnificent frescoes—this is the praise he deserves, and this is enough. His fame is in danger of being injured by those who claim

gifts for him that were not his own. And, had not too much been made of him as a philosopher, it would have been useless to dwell on his philosophy. It was necessary to clear the ground for the study of his poetry.

Before concluding this chapter it remains to ask whether we can trace any regular evolution of moral and religious feelings in Spenser's mind. A hasty survey of his career, and considerations of a general nature, would incline us to believe that, like many young men, he began with worldly and amorous thoughts but became graver and graver as he grew older. This view seems to be countenanced by the *Hymns* just mentioned above, as also by their dedication, which ascribes the earthly ones to his youth, the heavenly ones to his mature age. It is likewise well known that the last fragment of the *Fairy Queen* which Spenser wrote, the cantos on Mutability, ends in a stanza which shows him disgusted with the ceaseless change of worldly things and aspiring to the rest of eternity in the bosom of God:

Then gin I think on that which Nature said,
Of that same time when no more Change shall be,
But steadfast rest of all things, firmly staid
Upon the pillars of Eternity,
That is contrair to Mutability;
For all that moveth doth in Change delight:
But thenceforth all shall rest eternally
With Him that is the God of Sabaoth hight:
O! that great Sabaoth God, grant me that Sabaoth's sight!

But this simple view of Spenser's moral and religious development will not survive a closer examination of facts and dates. The growth of Spenser's religious tendencies is indeed more irregular and mysterious.

We must first of all consider that more space is given up to religious problems in his earliest poem, *The Shepherd's Calendar*, than in most of his later work. But there is a still stronger argument against the current theory in the fact that the great work which occupied almost all his poetical career—his *Fairy Queen*, composed between 1580 and 1596—shows an inverse progression, that it passes from the more serious to the more frivolous.

Of the six books he lived to write, the first two are those that show him in by far his gravest mood. The first book is the most religious as the second is the most moral of all. And this cannot only be accounted for by the fact that the subject of the first is holiness and that of the second temperance. The other virtues exalted in the following books might well have lent themselves to an equally serious treatment. But one feels, somehow, that the poet wanted some relaxation. He had begun as a severe allegorist and he becomes more and more of a romance- or story-teller as he goes on. Gradually he rids himself of the rigid allegorical frame and indulges in a freer study of human character, in more varied descriptions of the feelings of lovers. He eventually exposes himself to the censure of sour judges like Lord Burleigh, by

Magnifying lovers' dear debates
By which frail youth is oft to folly led.

He comes nigh to deserving the puritanical reproach of writing "looser rimes." He had begun his poem as an earnest Christian, but showed as he progressed an ever

closer kinship with flippant, wanton Ariosto. The sustained gravity of the teacher gives place to the capricious fancy of the amorist.

From the little we know of Spenser's life, it seems that his thoughts were less determined by age than by circumstances. The courtier in Leicester's palace turned to subjects less ecclesiastical than those which had occupied the secretary of Bishop Young. The exile in Ireland under the stern influence of the puritanical Lord Grey of Wilton entertained more serious thoughts than he did in the years that followed Grey's retirement. The hopeful poet who accompanied Sir Walter Raleigh to court in 1590 was big with expectations of queenly favour, as appears from the liveliness of his *Colin Clout*, or at any rate from that part of it which retraces his voyage and his first happy experiences. The disillusioned suitor, on the other hand, gives vent to his melancholy and bitterness by publishing his *Complaints of the World's Vanity*. The lover of Elizabeth Boyle makes his *Sonnets* and *Epithalamion* echo the alternate feelings of grief and joy that were stirred in his heart by the young lady's insensibility, and then by her consent—the series from beginning to end being full of chaste human rapture.

Then came in his last years the two *Heavenly Hymns*, which suggest the satiety of the husband, or the dejection of a courtier whose renewed ambition has not reached its goal, or the despondency of an Irish landlord who sees the sky of the Island darkened and reads in it the threatening signs of the rebellion of 1598, which was to end in the plundering and burning of his Kilcolman mansion.

To sum up, it is safer to assume that in Spenser's verse we see reflected the vicissitudes of his life, rather than a steady evolution leading him from thoughtless, half-pagan youthful joy to the pensive mood of the Christian sage. Like most poets, he felt the impulse of the day and hour. His poems reflect the colour of the sky over his head, blue and sombre by turns. His piety, though at all times sincere, was more or less apparent according to the seasons—more or less engrossing according as he felt the blessings or buffets of fortune. Yet above the span of his chequered career and alternating quest after earthly joy and heavenly bliss, an indubitable idealism is spread like the rainbow arching over a landscape beaten by the rain and illumined by the sun.

CHAPTER III

HIS LITERARY TENETS

SPENSER, as we concluded in the last chapter, was not an original thinker. He was no philosopher, though, according to Lodovick Bryskett, "he was very well read in Philosophy, both moral and natural," and qualified to discourse on Ethics "whereby virtues are to be distinguished from vices." He may have been well grounded in the doctrines of Aristotle and Plato, but when asked to expound their systems or his own views, he excused himself and referred the audience to his *Fairy Queen* as a poetical presentation of his doctrine. Whatever importance he might attach, in his secret conscience, to the substance of the poem, what holds us as we read it to-day is his poetical and not his philosophical genius. There is, moreover, no doubt that the amount of mental energy expended on the thought is utterly insignificant when compared with the labour so enthusiastically devoted to the adornment of the poem. Spenser was essentially an artist and a poet. From first to last his greatest labours as well as his keenest delight went to the writing of verses which he felt and knew to be more harmonious, more flowing, and ornamented with richer colours than those of his contemporaries.

His poetic ambition must have begun with his conscious years. It is apparent to us in his first published

poem—*The Shepherd's Calendar*. This poem, with its prefatory letter and its numerous notes, throws a vivid light on Spenser's poetical apprenticeship either at Cambridge or in the years that immediately followed his time at the university. It shows us, however interested Spenser may have been at Cambridge in the religious controversies then rife, however much engrossed by his first love Rosalind and dejected by her waywardness and treason—that he had one solace for all his cares: turning them into exquisite stanzas. It gives us a glimpse of that trio of university friends, Gabriel Harvey, Edward Kirke, and Spenser himself, whose common ambition was to raise the low standard of English letters to the level of France and even, if possible, of Italy.

Let us consider for a moment the condition of letters in Europe about the year 1578. For a whole century Italy had taken the lead and brought forth a number of writers whose glory illumined the world. She was foremost in 'the renascence of letters, and, not content with the passionate study of ancient models, Latin and Greek, either first revealed or newly interpreted, she had produced many an original writer who rivalled them in fame. Italy was the land of Petrarch, Boccaccio, Ariosto, Alamanni, Aretino, Machiavelli, Tasso, worthy companions to her wonderful painters, sculptors and architects.

France had entered into the field later, but since the middle of the sixteenth century, her progress had been steady and her achievements brilliant. Ronsard, Du Bellay, and the other stars of the poetic constellation

called the Pleiad, were spreading the fame of French verse over all European countries. Du Bellay's celebrated manifesto, by which he invited all French poets to plunder the ancients so as to raise their own language from its humble condition to the summits of lyrical and epic glory, was perhaps the greatest stimulus for Spenser at the time he began his career. Du Bellay is almost the only modern poet of that time whom he honoured by rendering his poems literally into English verse. It is true that he also honoured Petrarch in this way, but not to the same extent. And besides translating Du Bellay's *Visions* and *Ruins of Rome*, he also praised him in a fine sonnet, placed at the end of the latter translation when it appeared in 1591:

Bellay, first garland of free Poesie
That France brought forth, though fruitful of brave wits,
Well worthy thou of immortality,
That long hast traveld, by thy learned writs

Old Rome out of her ashes to revive
And give a second life to dead decays!
Needs must he all eternity survive
That can to other give eternal days.

Thy days therefore are endless, and thy praise
Excelling all that ever went before.
And after thee, gins Bartas high to raise
His heavenly Muse, th' Almighty to adore.

Live, happy spirits, th' honour of your name,
And fill the world with never dying fame!

But it was chiefly as a bold reformer that Du Bellay influenced Spenser, as the man who had redeemed the literature of his country from its abasement. And Spenser set before himself the task of doing for England

what Du Bellay had done for France about thirty years before.

The condition of English literature was indeed miserable in 1578. England had not yet produced a single poem of European fame since the Renaissance had awakened the Continent from its sleep. Wyatt, and chiefly Surrey, might have done it under Henry VIII. had not they been cut off by untimely death. Sackville, now Lord Buckhurst, had given fair promise of genius with his *Induction* to the *Mirror for Magistrates* but had soon turned from poetry to politics. The only poet of some importance that had appeared of late was George Gascoigne, who had tried with strange versatility almost all the avenues of literature, but without progressing very far in any of them before his death. He had not succeeded in raising English to the height of French and Italian. The three friends had some esteem for him, though it was tempered by reservations, as is shown by this note of E. K. to the Eleventh Eclogue:

“Master George Gascoigne, a witty gentleman, and the very chief of our late rimers, who, and if some parts of learning wanted not (albe it is well known he altogether wanted not learning), no doubt would have attained to the excellency of those famous poets. For gifts of wit and natural promptness appear in him abundantly.”

It was for Spenser—called the “new poet” among his friends—to perform the work left incomplete by Gascoigne. He would, like Du Bellay, lift up the vernacular from the dust. For that task he had the wide learning which was wanting to Gascoigne, and was

considered indispensable by the academic trio. It is a fact that the poetry of Spenser grew out of an academic soil, under the encouragement of men like Harvey and Kirke, who were not only learned but decidedly pedantic, who were gluttonous readers of books of all sorts, ancient and modern, with a preference for grammarians and critics, in the true spirit of the Renaissance. The commentary which E. K. added to Spenser's *Eclogues* quaintly testifies to his habit of giving rhetorical names to figures of speech and all ornaments of style or peculiarities of versification. Thanks to E. K.'s solicitude, Spenser's first poem was to be edited like a revered classical text, with notes that are redolent of the bookish atmosphere in which it had been born. The poet's images are carefully labelled, with Greek names, like the flowers in a botanical garden. We hear of nothing but *hypotyposis*, *syncope*, *epiphonema*, *paranomasia*. Kirke now extols "a pretty" or "an elegant *Epanorthosis*" (or correction), an "ironical *Sarcasmus*," "an *Exordium ad preparandos animos*," "a pathological *parenthesis* to encrease a careful *hyperbaton*"; now censures the use of alliteration, which he calls *cacozelon*, because it is reproved by Quintilian.

Kirke also prides himself on his etymological knowledge without suspecting that it was fanciful. He derives *eclogue* from αἰγῶν λόγοι, goatherds' tales, *loord* (meaning clown) from *Lord Dane*; he informs us that the fabulous cow Io was thus called "because that in the print of a Cowes foot, there is figured an I in the midst of an O."

Spenser is not directly responsible for these erudite

notes. And we should have liked to think that he laughed to himself over his friend's commentary. But nothing is less probable. He was proud of being edited like an ancient poet and of having his first verses used as a text for rhetorical exercises. He himself shared in the pedantry of his times. He is careful to write *cowberd* for *coward* so as to set off his idea of the etymology, a coward being a man of naught, a mere keeper of cows. He justifies his pessimism by stating that *world* comes from *warre old*, i.e. from that which gets worse as it grows old. He is one of the learned and will never fail to utter his indignation when he sees favour and glory bestowed on ignorant poets.

Yet, while we have enough proofs here of that almost fanatic admiration for antiquity which Du Bellay recommended, Spenser differed from Du Bellay and the French Pleiad on a point of the utmost importance—and the difference is not only characteristic of the two poets but, in a broad sense, of the two literatures, English and French.

Du Bellay was full of contempt for the poetical past of his country. He either ignored or despised the Middle Ages. He made light of all that had been written in French before his time. He wished to link his verse up directly with the poetry of the ancients as if nothing of any value had been written since until the year 1550, except in modern Italy. He was blind to the splendour and importance of the French mediæval romances. Though inspired by ardent patriotism (he is said to have coined the word *patrie*), he heartily despised the chivalric writing of Old France.

Not so Spenser. While he also admired and revered the ancients, he was at the same time full of reverence for his early English predecessors. He was enamoured of old English verse. Under the pastoral name of Tityrus, he proclaimed Chaucer his master, his teacher, his great pattern:

The God of shepherds, Tityrus, is dead,
Who taught me homely, as I can, to make;
He, whilst he livèd, was the sovereign head
Of shepherds all that been with love ytake:
Well couth he wail his woes, and lightly slake
The flames which love within his heart had bred,
And tell us merry tales to keep us wake,
The while our sheep about us safely fed.

Now dead is he and lieth wrapt in lead,
(O! why should Death on him such outrage show?)
And all his passing skill with him is fled,
The fame whereof doth daily greater grow.
But if on me some little drops would flow
Of that the spring was in his learnèd head,
I soon would learn these woods to wail my woe,
And teach the trees their trickling tears to shed.

Eclogue VI. 81.

Not a short-lived admiration, for fifteen years later, in the Fourth Book of his *Fairy Queen*, he was to write the famous lines:

Dan Chaucer, well of English undefyled,
On Fame's eternal beadroll worthy to be fyled.
Fairy Queen, IV. ii. 32.

This was not idle praise. Spenser really was a passionate reader of Chaucer and his contemporaries. He was so full of them that he made their language his own, as we are told by E. Kirke when he tries to account for Spenser's archaic vocabulary and justify it:

“And first of the words to speak, I grant they be something hard and of most men unused, yet both English and also used of most excellent Authors and most famous Poets. In whom, whenas this our Poet hath been much travelled and thoroughly read, how could it be . . . but that walking in the sun, although for other cause he walked, yet needs he mought be sunburnt; and, having the sound of those ancient Poets still ringing in his ears, he mought needs, in singing, hit out some of their tunes.”

Further on, E. Kirke undertakes to defend the vernacular against the Latinisers of the age who felt nothing but contempt for their mother tongue. Let us remember that, many years after, Bacon refused to trust his native language when writing his philosophy, being convinced that all modern tongues “would play bankrupt with books.” Kirke, speaking in Spenser’s name, declares “that our mother tongue of itself is both full enough for prose and stately enough for verse.”

He inveighs against those writers who “patched up the holes with pieces and rags of other languages, borrowing here of the French, there of the Italian, everywhere of the Latin . . . so now they have made an English tongue a gallimaufry or hodgepodge of all other speeches.” He rails at them as being unable to recognise and understand genuine old English words and calling them gibberish. They are men that “are not ashamed, in their own mother tongue, to be counted strangers and aliens”; who, “of their natural speech, which together with their nurse’s milk they sucked, have so base regard and bastard judgment, that they

will not only themselves not labour to garnish and beautify it, but also repine that of other it should be embellished."

In all this we recognise Du Bellay's teaching, though strangely altered and transformed. He, too, hoped much of his mother tongue, but instead of tracing it back to its source and reviving sound old words to enrich his vocabulary, he advised his countrymen to glean with a free hand from all the Latin or Greek works that seemed suitable.

The different attitude of Spenser is to some extent explained by the antiquarian tastes so widespread in England at the time—I mean the love of all the memories of the national past. It was the age of the chroniclers Edward Hall and Holinshed, of the great antiquarian William Camden, of John Stow. The first deliberate attempt was being made to revive Anglo-Saxon. Sir John Cheke had already remarked upon this relish for archaisms as among the affectations of the day ("The fine courtier will talk nothing but Chaucer"). Spenser, then, lived in an atmosphere of heated patriotism favourable to the revival and glorification of all that pertained to the past of Great Britain.

This accounts for his Chaucer-worship better than any natural affinity between him and the older poet. No man could well be more different from Chaucer than he. He had none of Chaucer's geniality and humour, none of his insight into individual characters, but little of his cleverness and animation as a story-teller. His genius took a different direction. Yet he did his best to copy his style and verse.

Now the regular beauty of Chaucer's verse, whether his heroic verse of ten syllables or his octosyllabics, was lost upon the men of Spenser's generation. We all know nowadays that Chaucer's verse can only be regular if we take into account the endings of his words—the final *e*'s—which were sounded as distinct syllables in his time. But language and grammar had changed considerably since the fourteenth century. These same endings had become mute and their metric value was well-nigh forgotten. The final *e*'s were often dropped in the later manuscripts of the poet and also in the first printed editions of his works. Spenser knew no more than his contemporaries of these historical changes. He read Chaucer's verses as irregular verses, and liked them with their supposed irregularities—though he held them too rude for noble flights and reserved them for humble compositions. Thus it is that his *Shepherd's Calendar*, so far as the versification is concerned, was really made up of two sorts of eclogues. Colin Clout's love is described in sonorous, perfect iambics, while the moral and religious controversies between common shepherds are written in lines of four beats which, Spenser thought, corresponded to Chaucer's couplets in the *Canterbury Tales*.

Séest how brág yond Búllock beárs
 So smírck, so smooóth, his pricked éárs?
 His hórn's been as broáð as Rainbow bént,
 His déwlap as líthe as láss of Ként:
 See hów he vénteth inté the wind;
 Weénest of lóve is nóť his mínd? . . .

This erroneous imitation of Chaucer happened to furnish him with an element of versification from which

he drew special effects of rusticity. At the same time, in other eclogues, he preserved or restored the regular heroic verse, and thus reclaimed it from a hundred and fifty years of anarchy. He has the smoothest stanzas in contrast with the rough couplets aforesaid, and heightens their melodiousness by contrast:

A Shepherd's boy (no better do him call),
When winter's wasteful spite was almost spent,
All in a sunshine day, as did befall,
Led forth his flock that had been long ypent:
So faint they woxe, and feeble in the fold,
That now unneathes their feet could them uphold.

This was not all. The "new poet" showed his mastery of verse by using the most varied stanzas, taking a pleasure and a pride in his skill. The most intricate combinations of rimes had for him no secret. If you will but turn the leaves of his *Shepherd's Calendar* you will be struck at once by the ever-changing aspect of the pages, where individual lines and stanzas constantly vary in length and structure. No poem of such diversity of form had appeared before, and I am not sure that English poetry has ever since produced any in which the artistic or artificial changes are so many and so striking.

Songs are scattered here and there; their rhythm, which is of the poet's invention, is even better than in his couplets or stanzas, and shows how supple and musical his lyrical metres can be. Take for instance the song in praise of Eliza, queen of shepherds, "which Colin tuned unto the waterfall":

See where she sits upon the grassy green,
(O seemly sight!)
Yclad in Scarlet like a maiden Queen
And ermines white:

Upon her head a Cremosin coronet,
 With damask roses and daffadillies set:
 Bay leaves between
 And primroses green
 Embellish the sweet violet.

Tell me, have ye seen her angelic face,
 Like Phoebe fair?
 Her heavenly haviour, her princely grace
 Can you well compare?
 The Red rose meddled with the Whyte yfere,
 In either cheek depeincten lively chere:
 Her modest eye,
 Her Majesty,
 Where have you seen the like but there?

In contrast with this brisk and lively tune, the elegy on Dido, in the Eleventh Eclogue, has a metre full of sustained dignity and noble pathos. The matter is of no account, being a mere translation of a pastoral elegy by the French poet Clément Marot. Spenser's originality is only seen in the form, which is of his own invention:

O trustless state of earthly things, and slipper hope
 Of mortal men, that swinck and sweat for nought,
 And, shooting wide, do miss the marked scope;
 Now have I learnt (a lesson dearly bought)
 That nis on earth assurance to be sought;
 For what might be in earthly mould
 That did her buried body hold.
 O heavy hearse!
 Yet saw I on the bier when it was brought;
 O careful verse!

These were the first of the many beautiful songs which are scattered like flowers through the great years of the English Renaissance. If we consider the state of English verse when Spenser began to sing—and it is hard to exaggerate its wooden stiffness or its chaotic licence—the rich variety and all but infallible artistic skill of the *Shepherd's Calendar* strike us as scarcely less than

miraculous. We understand why that poem, so slight in subject, so artificial in its picture of the feelings of love, was hailed as a national achievement, and gave Spenser's countrymen the sense of the poetic power inherent in English verse and every hope of rivalling at last the continental literatures with which they had not yet dared to compete. The innovation was not only in the versification but also, and perhaps chiefly, in the style. Except for his archaisms, which are scattered through all his poems and are a constant tribute to his early English predecessors, Spenser wrote easily, naturally. He had none of the grimaces and contortions of "the rakehellly route of our ragged rymers" (to use E. Kirke's words), who for want of matter or rime "seem to be so pained and travailed in their remembrance, as it were a woman in childbirth or as that same Pythia when the trance came upon her. . . ."

Spenser's extraordinary ease, which remains unsurpassed and perhaps unmatched after more than three centuries of abundant poetical composition, is from the first pointed out by the same E. K. in very apt terms:

"For the knitting of sentences, which they call the joints and members thereof, and for all the compass of the speech, it is round without roughness, and learned without hardness, such indeed as may be perceived of the least, understood of the most, but judged only of the learned. For what in most English writers useth to be loose, and as it were ungirt, in this author is well grounded, finely framed, and strongly trussed up together."

Here Kirke laid his finger on the true glory of Colin Clout—his copiousness, the flow of his sentences, his unfailing and inexhaustible felicity of speech, an inborn gift, no doubt, but surely perfected by long preparation and unwearied exertions, and of far greater value than the subject itself, or the thoughts and feelings. The matter was of slight importance if compared to the form.

Hence it comes that his first poem—though doubly desolate if we consider the themes treated: the author's unfortunate love of Rosalind, which leads him to despair, and his utter discontent with the moral or religious condition of his times—his first poem is on the whole illumined, in spite of its themes, with a joy which dissipates the shadows: the joy of a young poet ravished by the beauty and harmony of his own verse. Though Colin Clout does not exactly sing his own praise, he is surrounded with admiring shepherds who vie in praise of his musical excellence. Hobbinol (i.e. Harvey), above all, never ceases to mourn over the idle love which has made Colin silent:

Shepherds' delights he doth them all forswear;
His pleasant Pipe, which made us merriment,
He wilfully hath broke, and doth forbear
His wonted songs, wherein he all outwent.

Eclogue IV. 5-8.

Though Colin modestly declares that he is only a rustic piper, unworthy to ascend the hill of Parnassus:

I wote my rimes been rough and rudely drest,

Hobbinol cannot refrain his enthusiasm:

Colin, to hear thy rimes and roundelays,
Which thou wert wont on wastful hills to sing,
I more delight than lark in Sommer days,
Whose Echo made the neighbour groves to ring,
And taught the birds, which in the lower spring
Did shroud in shady leaves from sonny rays,
Frame to thy song their cheerful cheriping,
Or hold their peace, for shame of thy sweet lays.

I saw Calliope with Muses mo,
Soon as thy oaten pipe began to sound,
Their ivory Lutes and Tamburins forgo,
And from the fountain, where they sat around,
Run after hastily thy silver sound;
But, when they came where thou thy skill didst show,
They drew aback, as half with shame confound,
Shepherd to see them in their art outgo.

Eclogue VI. 49-64.

In the Eighth Eclogue, Cuddie will be crowned as winner of the poetical tournament if he merely consents to repeat a sentence written by Colin:

O Colin, Colin! the shepherd's joy,
How I admire each turning of thy verse.

The same Cuddie also declares himself unable to sing songs fit for the Palace of Princes, an ambition reserved for greater Colin Clout:

For Colin fits such famous flight to scan;
He, were he not with love so ill bedight,
Would mount as high and sing as soot as Swan.

Eclogue X.

In the same vein, Thenot refuses to sing when Colin is near:

The nightingale is sovereign of song,
Before him sits the Titmouse silent be. . . .

thus summing up the opinions of all shepherds, who gladly admit the supremacy of Colin, the nightingale that eclipses all the common singers of the grove.

Thus from the first was Spenser acknowledged by his friends to be the prince of poets—and from this narrow circle his homage spread rapidly over the whole country. It became a sort of national creed, acknowledged by critics and prosodists, which concealed from many eyes the fact that Spenser was really an isolated figure who, far from representing the spirit of his age, nearly always stood out against it. The tale of his opposition to the main current of Elizabethan poetry has now to be told.

He had the most exalted idea of poetry, “no art, but a divine gift, and heavenly instinct, not to be gotten by labour and learning, but adorned with both, and poured into the wit by a certain *Ἐνθουσιασμός* and celestial inspiration,” as the author (says Kirke), elsewhere at large discourseth in his book called *The English Poet*.”

There was nothing peculiarly his own in this lofty ideal, derived as it was from Plato’s Italian commentators. And the glowing tribute which Sir Philip Sidney pays the poet about the same time, in his famous *Defence of Poetry*, is not very differently expressed. Spenser’s book is unfortunately lost, but its purport may be conjectured from the reflections scattered about his works, which are so many attacks levelled against the degeneracy of contemporary poets.

Even as early as 1579, in his October Eclogue, he had railed against the base condition of poetry which, left without patronage, poor for want of heroic subjects, had nothing of its former greatness left. The only poems of any cleverness were, he said, mere “rimes of ribaldry.”

But this was only a passing mood, for Spenser then was young and hopeful, and little doubted his power to effect a sweeping reform.

The case was different when, some twelve years later, he came back from his long Irish exile to revisit London and the court. Once the intoxicating effect of the applause that greeted his *Fairy Queen* had died down, he felt himself in an alien world. The latest tendencies of poetry aroused his surprise and indignation. He might still lavish polite and interested praise upon noble courtiers who worshipped the Muses or new poets favoured by the queen and court, though now for the most part utterly forgotten—but the broad stream of literature flowed in a direction contrary to his own impulses. His ideal of a refined and noble poetry, teaching virtue by processes of delight, was perturbed by the rapid growth of a coarse popular literature, licentious both in substance and form, often cynical, which flourished chiefly on the public stage. Ten or twelve years had elapsed since Sidney deplored the base condition of the drama. Much had been accomplished in the time, but to Spenser this progress only seemed to tend towards barbarism. To us the decade appears to be full of life and high hopes, for Shakespeare's predecessors were then at work, and probably young Shakespeare himself.

Yet, when Spenser reviews the state of English literature in his *Tears of the Muses*, published in 1591, nothing finds grace in his eyes. Every Muse comes forth with her private tale of grief and despair. It is true that their chief grievance is the lack of

encouragement and patronage from the great. But the consequence of it is the desecration of all culture. Euterpe deploras the decay of the pastorals to which Spenser had devoted his earliest efforts:

Our pleasant groves, which planted were with pains,
That with our music wont so oft to ring,
And arbours sweet, in which the Shepherds swains
Were wont so oft their Pastorals to sing,
They have cut down, and all their pleasure marred,
That now no Pastoral is to be hard.

Terpsichore and Erato complain that the pictures of pure Platonic love have given place to mere debauchery: the so-called poets of the day can only sing of lust:

Fair ladies' love they spot with thoughts impure . . .

"their dunghill thoughts" dare not aspire to perfection.

The very style of poetry has lost its purity. It is now mere bombast (so says Polyhymnia):

For the sweet numbers and melodious measures
With which I wont the wingèd words to tie,
And make a tuneful Diapase of pleasures,
Now being let to run at liberty
By those which have no skill to rule them right,
Have now quite lost their natural delight.

Heaps of huge words uphoarded hideously,
With horrid sound though having little sense,
They think to be chief praise of Poetry. . . .

But Spenser's chief attacks are directed against playwrights. Melpomene, the Tragic Muse, and Thalia, the Muse of Comedy, are equally pessimistic. Learning and decency have been banished from the stage. Thalia mourns over her state: has not she been "made servant of the many"? The dainty comic wit is gone:

Instead thereof scoffing Scurrility
And scornful Folly with Contempt is crept,
Rolling in rimes of shameless ribaudry
Without regard, or due Decorum kept. . . .

Though Spenser excepts "our pleasant Willy"—by whom he may mean John Lyly the Euphuist—he has nothing but disgust for all the rest of the dramatic tribe. The thundering blasphemies of Marlowe's *Tamere-lane*, the tragic horrors of the *Spanish Tragedy*, the sugared graces of Peele's *Arraignement of Paris*, the early attempts of Robert Greene, and Shakespeare's profuse wit in *Love's Labour's Lost*, as far as he knew those plays, only provoked his indignation or contempt.

Clearly, Spenser felt no sympathy with the new and rising era. Towards 1591 English literature was just entering upon its glorious career, though its greatness was still concealed under a mountain of faults, and only visible to sympathetic eyes. Generally speaking, it was an age impatient of restraints, free from the yoke of tradition, boisterous and tumultuous, full of rough promise for the future. It was the age of all affectations and conceits, now subtle, now coarse, a medley of all forms of expression. But Spenser's manner was sustained and simple—his only mannerism was his use of archaisms, and this helped to make him appear obsolete. Strange to say, the work of his friend Sidney (whose Sonnets and *Arcadia*, long kept secret, were now being published posthumously) found a readier echo than his own verse. For all the chivalry of his *Arcadia*, Sidney had resolutely entered into modern avenues of literature. His bold metaphoric style, the strange conceits of his *Arcadia*, were the admired models of a generation sated

with the relatively mechanical affectation of euphuism. From the first Sidney had disapproved of Spenser's fondness for archaisms. In the years that followed, that same archaic style of his was to make Spenser's poetry seem still more remote from use, and Ben Jonson only expressed the prevalent impression of the early seventeenth century when he censured Spenser as one "who writ no language."

Now, we have already said that the archaic style was by no means an accident in Spenser's case. It testifies to his love and knowledge of the past, to the way his imagination was haunted by the Middle Ages. It is only the most visible mark of an influence at work in all his poetry—an influence which not only colours his language and style, but affects the structure of almost all his poems. His relish for allegory is only equalled by his love of the old Arthurian romances. And while his vocabulary does not take us back further than Chaucer, the general form of his poems may be traced to earlier authors yet. The realistic painter of the Canterbury pilgrims was indeed far too modern for Spenser. His real models were the *Romaunt of the Rose* and the old epics of chivalry.

Save in a few cases which we shall examine later on, Spenser was opposed to the modern practice of expressing thoughts and feelings directly. He seems to have felt that in poetry all thought and emotion should be presented under some veil or other—be it pastoral, mythology, fable, allegory or symbol. And if we except the pastoral, which was in the main a creation or re-creation of the Renaissance, Spenser borrowed the other

forms from much older literatures. All of these forms are essentially disguises. In the pastoral, the characters (whether of lovers or priests) are disguised as shepherds; in fables, as plants or animals; in allegory, as abstract qualities.

I need not say that the pastoral fills an important place in Spenser's works—his *Shepherd's Calendar*, his *Colin Clout's Come Home Again*, his elegies of *Daphnaïda* and of *Astrophel*, the latter on the death of Sir Philip Sidney, and also part of the Sixth Book of his *Fairy Queen*—all that relates to the loves of Sir Calidore and Pastorella. The artificial charm of the pastoral delighted Spenser. It allowed him a vent for his feelings as a lover and also for his satire as a discontented observer of the manners of his day; by turns it enabled him to both hide his own personality and reveal it by glimpses under the fictive name of Colin Clout. The pastoral served him both as veil and ornament.

Spenser has several fables scattered about his works: e.g. "The Oak and Brier," in the Second Eclogue, and "The Fox and the Kid" in the Fourth; the fable of the "Fox and the Ape," which makes up the whole of his *Mother Hubbard's Tale*—his bitterest political satire—and also a more poetical and personal one than all the others, *The Fate of the Butterfly* (or *Muiopotmos*), wherein he has related the murder of beautiful Clarion, the butterfly, by the hateful Arachnol, the spider.

As with the pastoral, Spenser has made use of these fables to present in their guise certain personal incidents in his career, or certain public events which he did not dare to make too clear. But though the fable so far

served a purpose, there was too much life and reality about the animals of fable for Spenser's taste. They crowded out his idealism. So that he felt more at ease in moral allegory, pure and simple, which gave him a better means of adapting his characters to his ideas.

Thus it is that his masterpiece, which is also by far his longest poem, is above all an allegory. Here he mingles the decorations of the Arthurian romances, the personifications of the virtues and vices familiar to the Middle Ages but almost forsaken in his day, with contemporary moralities. He warns us that his heroes stand for one or other of the cardinal virtues—the Red-Cross Knight is Holiness; Sir Guyon is Temperance; Britomart is Chastity; Cambell and Triamond stand for Friendship; Artegall is Justice; Sir Calidore is Courtesy. They are all half-human, half-abstract—or rather, they are all abstractions clad in the garb of some knight or other.

Spenser verily believed that in so doing he was following the example of all the great epic poets of antiquity and of modern times, for he had read them all with the scholastic eyes of the Middle Ages. In that letter to Sir W. Raleigh which serves as preface to his *Fairy Queen*, he says:

“I have followed all the antique Poets historical; first Homer, who, in the persons of Agamemnon and Ulysses, hath ensampled a good governor and a virtuous man, the one in his *Ilias*, the other in his *Odyssey*; then Virgil, whose like intention was to do in the person of Æneas; after him Ariosto comprised them both in his *Orlando*, and lately Tasso discovered them again and

formed both parts in two persons, namely that part which in philosophy they call *Ethice* or virtues of a private man coloured in his Rinaldo; the other named *Politice* in his Godfredo."

How quaint and remote that view of poetry appears to us! But it seemed scarcely less out of date to the authors of the great Elizabethan generation, intent on the study of man as man, in all the rich complexity of his nature. How archaic to the public who attended the tragedies of the time! How diametrically opposed to the conception of such characters as those of Hamlet, Othello or Lear!

Yet the great champions of the *Fairy Queen* are not the only, are not even the extreme examples of Spenser's mediævalism. His poem teems with pure abstractions which do not even wear the transparent disguise of a chivalric costume. The House of Holiness, the House of Pride, the House of Care, and many others, are mere allegorical symbols for the ideas which Spenser meant to impart to the reader. For all these structures and their inmates he seems to claim as real an existence as for the other scenes of his romance and his Arthurian characters. We may take for example his House of Temperance, one of the most elaborate allegorical structures erected by him in the Land of Fairy. It is the dwelling-place of Alma, by which is meant the virtuous soul. After many perils and difficulties, Arthur and Sir Guyon gain access to it. They are welcomed by Alma, who makes them visit her castle—every detail of which is made to correspond ingeniously to some part of the human body regulated by temperance. The entrance is

the mouth, within which is the tongue that never speaks without due reason (symbolised by the Porter sitting within the Barbican). The teeth are twice sixteen warders standing round the porch. Passing through that gate, the visitors are introduced into a stately hall where a banquet is served (this hall being the stomach). The Marshal of the Hall is Appetite. All the successive operations of digestion are in their turn represented in the same concrete manner, the master cook being Concoction. Thence the visitors pass into a beautiful parlour wherein a lovely bevy of ladies are seated, the fairest of them being Shamefastness. The parlour is a symbol of the heart.

They next ascend to a turret and, lifting up their eyes, see an arched roof above them—meaning the neck, the head and the cranium. In the turret are two goodly beacons, i.e. the eyes. All the description is quaint, touched with the naïve and even childish. It is true that when exploring the mysteries of the brain, where the imagination takes rise in the front chamber, whereas in the back all we find is Memory, sitting at his desk—an old man, that is, in a library full of the records of ancient times—it is true that then the great poet asserts himself by degrees. He now gives expression to his sense of wonder before the enigma of the human mind. He has forgotten his trite moral theme of temperance.

But the foundation of the whole edifice is strangely mediæval. It really belongs to the thirteenth or early fourteenth century, before Chaucer. It seems almost incredible that it should have been thus patiently built up in the age of Marlowe, Shakespeare and Bacon.

It is therefore not surprising that Spenser's poetry failed to make any appeal to many of the younger writers of the time. For though he had stirred patriotic minds to enthusiasm, and though he was to have imitators in the next generation, such as William Browne, the pastoralist, and Giles and Phineas Fletcher, his poetry did not satisfy the appetites of an age that craved for novelty and abounded in intellectual energy. It was too complacently slow to keep pace with an epoch of quick wit and ever-increasing hurry. Allegory is, after all, an image long drawn out, a figure of speech that endures now for a whole page, now through a whole volume. The eager taste of the public was becoming impatient even of comparisons and delighted most in the most elliptical metaphors. While Spenser wrote the last books of his *Fairy Queen*, John Donne was composing his earliest love poems with a success so sudden and so lasting that he gave the impulse to half a century of "metaphysical" poetry. His was the very antipodes of Spenser's overflowing leisurely manner—of that essential purity of style and simplicity of thought, disguised in archaism and allegory. To Spenser's redundancy (which soon came to be regarded as the outcome of a somewhat puerile strain of thought) was to succeed a language of sharp, condensed, obscure and tantalising enigmas. Spenser was content all his life to make use of the most obvious ideas and current images; Donne and his tribe were to substitute the voluntary choice of what was most subtle, eccentric and rare. The beginning of Donne's ascendancy, not long after 1600, was to mark the decline, not of Spenser's glory, but of his active

influence. English poetry had, if we may say so, cut its teeth and wanted harder and harder nuts to crack. It no longer would drink the full bowls of milk or "of cream uncruddled" which had fed and delighted its earliest years.

CHAPTER IV

HIS PERSONAL POETRY

THE "AMORETTI" AND "EPITHALAMION"

THE marvellous popularity of the sonnet in the Elizabethan age can better be understood when one considers that it was about the only means which the poets of that time had at their disposal to express their personal feelings without having recourse to the traditional disguises of allegory, fable, pastoral or symbol. Since Petrarch's time, to go no further back, the sonnet had become almost the only form which the poet lover used when pouring out his soul to his mistress. Spenser was not the first to introduce it into English poetry. Half a century before his day it had been attempted with success by Wyatt and the Earl of Surrey. After a long eclipse it had a glorious revival in about 1580-82, when Philip Sidney used it in his *Astrophel and Stella* to tell his love for Penelope Devereux, then the wife of Lord Rich. Sidney's sincere and passionate sonnets remained private while he lived, and were only published some ten years after their composition. But their success was then so great that nearly all the poets of the age began to imitate and emulate them: Daniel, Drayton, Barnes, Shakespeare himself, and many more.

Spenser, who had already translated some moral and symbolic sonnets from the French of Du Bellay, then bethought himself of the sonnet form for his own

purposes, and had recourse to it to sing his passion for the young lady he had fallen in love with and was to marry soon after, in June 1594. If Spenser does not come first in time among the English sonneteers, he may nevertheless be granted some share of originality. His great predecessors, Petrarch, Ronsard, Sidney (as well as his contemporary, Shakespeare), however they might redeem their sonnets by lofty idealism or a chivalric atmosphere, had made them the interpreters of irregular passions. Spenser, on the contrary, dedicated all his own to Elizabeth, his future wife. This poetic devotion to the betrothed may seem to us the most natural expression of love, but in former ages it was rare, even exceptional. The theme did not seem sufficiently dramatic to the earlier poets. Their heroine was usually a married lady from whom they were separated by an insuperable barrier—the jealousy of a husband, or the moral code. Hence arose two contrary conceptions: either pure, sublimated, Platonic love, a sort of exalted friendship in which the lover only hungered for his lady's beautiful soul, and bowed to her in pious reverence as to an unapproachable angelic being; or a wild passion that would break all marriage bonds and set morality at defiance. That Sidney, noble-minded, chivalric Sidney himself, had sought to possess Lady Rich, married though she was, and that the relations between them were looked upon by one and all as the pinnacle and pattern of pure love—this opens up curious vistas into the morals of the age.

Spenser's originality, then, was this: that he dedicated his verse to a maiden he could and *did* marry in the

end. Hence a sanity, a purity in his sonnets scarcely to be found elsewhere in that century—also that quality of “maidenliness” which we have already noted in him, and for which Coleridge justly said that Spenser was distinguished among his compeers.

Not that he wrote without borrowing anything from them, without being influenced by tradition. Many a sonnet of his reminds the reader of conceits already met with, of images long familiar. Though the sonnet has this singular advantage over the other forms of poetry then prevalent, that it lends itself to the immediate and direct utterance of individual feelings, yet the spirit and manner of Petrarch, the great originator, are more or less recognisable in all his successors. Nevertheless, without denying Spenser’s many debts to Italian and French sonneteers, most of which have been pointed out (with some exaggeration, I think) by Sir Sidney Lee, we ought to do justice to the personal accent of the *Amoretti*, taken as a whole, and we shall easily detect, among the eighty-eight small poems of the sequence, several that sound the genuine, unmistakable Spenserian note.

But first of all I must make mention of a theory recently advanced by a keen American critic of Spenser. Mr. Percy W. Long believes that many of Spenser’s sonnets may not have been composed for his Elizabeth, but for one of the poet’s noble cousins, Lady Carey—the same lady to whom he paid much dutiful homage about the year 1591, chiefly during his stay at court with Sir Walter Raleigh. To her he dedicated his *Fate of the Butterfly* and one of the prefatory sonnets to the *Fairy Queen*,

and on both occasions he spoke of her in terms of warm and almost amorous though always reverent devotion.

Mr. Long has established that there is a great analogy of language and tone between some of the *Amoretti* and Spenser's homage to Lady Carey. His reasoning is subtle and cogent, but his conclusion seems to me hypercritical. In all their verses to great ladies, or even to the queen herself, the poets of that day had to represent themselves as humble, hopeless lovers. To account for the language of the *Amoretti* we need only assume that the poet is wooing a young lady of higher estate, and by turns complains of her insensibility and apologises for raising his eyes to her. We are pretty safe in following tradition, and considering the sonnets as the poet's open tribute to his future wife.

Another interpretation of the sonnets has been recently suggested by Professor Garrod. According to him, Spenser's Elizabeth was a widow when he wooed her, having been previously married to a certain Tristram Peace. But the evidence he brings forth to prove his theory is far from convincing. Stronger proofs are needed to shake the reader's belief in the "maidenliness" of the poet's bride.¹

We find in the *Amoretti*, then, not that conflict between conscience and passion, between reason and will, which makes the dramatic interest of Sidney's *Astrophel and Stella*, but the story of a long and innocent love-suit, wherein the poet, at first dejected by his lady's indifference, is finally enraptured when she accepts his homage.

¹ *Times Literary Supplement*, May 10 and 24, 1923.

Following the example of many other poets, Spenser rehearses only the coldness and cruelty of his mistress in the earlier, if the greater number of his sonnets. He sings her beautiful eyes, which can dart either life or death into his heart—which hold all men's souls captive but have nothing for him but scorn and mockery. He celebrates her proud bearing; she is "the fair warrior" who, for a whole year, rejects her lover's advances. He loses all relish for his work, even for poetry. He has interrupted the composition of his *Fairy Queen*. He robs his most sacred sovereign of her due. He is ill—"languishes in double malady, of his heart's wound and of his body's grief." A leech (a doctor) comes to assist him, but only sees his body's ailment, and has no cordial for his aching heart. There is only one leech that could heal him: the lady herself.

He is a poet and pleads with eloquence. Will his verse win him the stubborn heart of the virgin? One day he sees she has adorned her brows with the laurel-leaves he had given her, and rejoices at the sight. Is not the laurel the emblem of poetry, and is not he a poet? But the wayward maid replies that the laurel is also the ornament of conquerors and that she holds him for her slave.

She denies him the least favour. For a whole year he could only obtain one smile, which he celebrates in two enraptured sonnets, but this smile long remained without a companion. Does he write too tender a letter to her, she tears it to pieces in anger. She only allows his visits at the prescribed hour, and if he stays on ever so little, she orders him to go out, even if the sky

is dark and the rain falls in torrents, so that he seems to disobey heaven when he obeys his mistress. Often when he leaves her to return home, he goes away with a heavy heart, like a prisoner spoiled of his weapons. None of his efforts to win her has been successful. She is an indifferent looker-on when he acts and plays for her entertainment—whether he offers her the sprightliness of comedy or the sight of tragical tears. When he laughs, she mocks him; when he weeps, she laughs and hardens her heart still more. One year of such torments has seemed to him longer than the forty years of his life. (We must note here that he is over forty and, in all probability, twice as old as the maiden he woos.)

Yet he never quite loses hope. He even finds reasons to bless such cruelty, such long disdain. Though he now and then reproaches her for her hardness, and tells her, in Portia's manner, that "mercy is the jewel of the mighty," on the other hand, he considers that the slower the birth of love in a virgin's heart, the longer it will last once kindled. And this sonnet (VI.) is of rare quality. It would alone suffice to distinguish the *Amoretti* from similar compositions. Here the poet's own note makes itself heard — his maidenliness, understanding thereby the love of all that is virginal in woman. This is how he chides his own impatience:

Be nought dismay'd that her unmovèd mind
Doth still persist in her rebellious pride:
Such love, not like to lusts of baser kind,
The harder won, the firmer will abide.
The dureful oak, whose sap is not yet dried,
Is long ere it conceive the kindling fire;
But when it once doth burn, it doth divide
Great heat, and makes his flames to heaven aspire.

So hard it is to kindle new desire¹
In gentle breast, that shall endure for ever:
Deep is the wound that dints the parts entire
With chaste effects that naught but death can sever;
Then think not long in taking little pain
To knit the knot that ever shall remain.

After a year's expectation, his perseverance won him the coveted prize; he at length descried the happy shore. He succeeded in printing the first kiss on the lips of the young girl, now his betrothed, and sang his triumph in the lyrical language of Solomon's Song. The perfumes of a whole flower-garden have invaded his senses at once.

But of more personal² and exquisite charm is Sonnet LXVII., in which he expressed his delighted surprise at the sudden and mysterious change in the capricious maiden's heart:

Like as a huntsman after weary chase,
Seeing the game from him escap't away,
Sits down to rest him in some shady place,
With panting hounds beguiled of their prey;
So after long pursuit and vain assay,
When I all weary had the chase forsook,
The gentle dear return'd the self-same way,
Thinking to quench her thirst at the next brook:

¹ Professor Garrod suggests that *new desire* implies a former love, and holds that these words together with the last line of the fourth Sonnet:

"Prepare your selfe new love to enttaine,"

are clearly addressed to a widow rather than to a maiden. But surely *new* may just as well be understood as meaning "unknown," "unfelt before." There would be indeed little delicacy in reminding the beloved of her former "desire"; the whole sonnet is to the praise of a heart still untamed and unused to the tender passion.

² Though perhaps reminiscent of Tasso's sonnet to the "gentile fera."

There she, beholding me with milder look,
 Sought not to fly, but fearless did still bide,
 Till I in hand her yet half trembling took,
 And with her own good-will her firmly tied.
 Strange thing, me seemed, to see a beast so wild
 So goodly won, with her own will beguil'd.

He now wonders how his arguments could ever prevail upon her. He almost feels remorse at his victory: has he not drawn down to himself a being belonging to a superior sphere?

Why did ye stoop unto so lowly state?

His joy assumes a grave religious tone. He calls down on his love, on Easter Day, the blessings of the most glorious Lord of Life, who taught men the lesson of love. Elsewhere his verse is like a trophy erected to record his conquest, achieved after long labour.

He now enjoys familiar intercourse with her. The year before, he was grieved to see that the call of the cuckoo, Spring's herald, could not induce her to join the couples of lovers going out to walk over the gardens and the fields. But now he comes to her very door to sing a morning song which he knows will be heard by her (Sonnet LXX.):

Fresh Spring, the herald of love's mighty king,
 In whose coat-armour richly are display'd
 All sorts of flowers, the which on earth do spring,
 In goodly colours gloriously array'd,
 Go to my love, where she is careless laid,
 Yet in her winter's bower not well awake;
 Tell her the joyous time will not be stay'd
 Unless she do him by the forelock take;
 Bid her therefore herself soon ready make
 To wait on Love amongst his lovely crew,
 Where every one that misseth then her make,
 Shall be by him amerc'd with penance due.
 Make haste, therefore, sweet love, whilst it is prime;
 For none can call again the passèd time.

We have here the anacreontic motto, so admirably taken up by our Ronsard, but purified by the betrothal of the lovers :

Vivez, si m'en croyez, n'attendez à demain,
Cueillez dès aujourd'hui les roses de la vie.

They now have charming and tender debates. She has yielded, but not without regretting her lost liberty, not without fear of the thralldom she will fall into, but he comforts her; she need not fear:

The doubt which ye misdeem, fair love, is vain,
That fondly fear to love your liberty;
When, losing one, two liberties you gain,
And make him bond that bondage erst did fly.

Sonnet lxxv.

Another day he comes upon her while she is at her embroidery, designing a bee and a spider. Is it a symbol? Probably, for she half-laughingly lets him understand she is the bee destined to be the spider's prey. He proudly admits it is so, proudly boasts of his conquest, though he promises to make her prison sweet to her:

I joy to see how, in your drawn work,
Yourself unto the Bee ye do compare,
And me unto the Spider, that doth lurk
In close await, to catch her unaware;
Right so yourself were caught in cunning snare
Of a dear foe, and thrallèd to his love;
In whose strait bands ye now captivèd are
So firmly, that ye never may remove.
But as your work is woven all above
With woodbine flowers and fragrant Eglantine,
So sweet your prison you in time shall prove,
With many dear delights bedeckèd fine.
And all thenceforth eternal peace shall see
Between the Spider and the gentle Bee.

Sonnet lxxi.

He blesses her name — Elizabeth — a thrice-blessed name, at the same time that of his mother, of his queen

and of his love. He delights in tracing it on the sand of the beach, in one of their walks along the sea, near Cork or Youghal :

One day I wrote her name upon the strand;
But came the waves and washèd it away:
Again I wrote it with a second hand;
But came the tide and made my pains his prey.
"Vain man," said she, "that doest in vain assay
A mortal thing so to immortalise;
For I myself shall like to this decay
And eke my name be wipèd out likewise."
"Not so," quod I; "let baser things devise
To die in dust, but you shall live by fame;
My verse your virtues rare shall eternise
And in the heavens write your glorious name,
Where, whenas death shall all the world subdue,
Our love shall live and later life renew."

Sonnet lxxv.

The exquisite chastity of the sonnets I have just quoted is counterbalanced by the rich sensuousness of several others. There the lover revels in abundant descriptions of his mistress's physical charms: her golden hair, her lily skin, her coral lips, her eyes of flame, her swelling bosom like a ship laden with precious merchandise. The two sides of the poet's nature are apparent here as they are everywhere in his works. He checks his impatient desires when he feels impelled to overstep the bounds of chaste love, but, characteristically, gives vent to his voluptuousness even when he drives away voluptuous thoughts:

Let not one spark of filthy lustful fire
Break out, that may her sacred peace molest;
Ne one light glance of sensual desire
Attempt to work her gentle mind's unrest;
But pure affections bred in spotless breast
And modest thoughts breath'd from well-tempered sprites,
Go visit her in her chaste bower of rest
Accompanied with ángelic delights.

There fill yourself with those most joyous sights
 The which myself could never yet attain,
 But speak no word to her of these sad plights
 Which her too constant stiffness doth constrain.
 Only behold her rare perfection
 And bless your fortune's fair election.

Sonnet lxxxiii.

There is nothing very striking in the last sonnets, which seem to have been composed in some disorder between the betrothal and the wedding. In one we hear him deplore the absence of the beloved:

Lacking my love, I go from place to place, . . .
 I seek the fields with her late footing sign'd;
 I seek her bower with her late presence deck'd,
 Yet nor in field nor bower I her can find,
 Yet field and bower are full of her aspect.

Sonnet lxxviii.

In another sonnet he complains of the venomous tongues which have slandered him to her, and stirred her anger against him.

There is only one sonnet which we had rather do without, Sonnet LXXX., in which he informs us he has completed the first six books of his *Fairy Queen*, and begs leave to rest a little while from that immense labour and sing his beloved. Here, in the style of an inveterate courtier, he warily adds:

But let her praises yet be low and mean,
 Fit for the handmaid of the Fairy Queen.

Surely this was a mere commonplace, inserted for the jealous eyes of that queen who looked askance on the brides of all those who had once devoted themselves to her service, or had declared themselves (were it only in poetical style) her worshippers. But we cannot help regretting that cautious reservation in the midst of this devout, warm-hearted sonnet sequence.

Such are Spenser's *Amoretti*. In their melodiousness and ease, they mark an advance on Sidney's sonnets, which are often stiff, stilted and obscure, even though Spenser's may lack the arresting theme, the happy valiancy, the dramatic movement of *Astrophel and Stella*—though they never succeed in conveying so personal a touch of passion, so direct a vision of the heroine. Only think of Stella's "sweet-swelling lips," an epithet so full of passionate recollections, so suggestive of the lady's looks and love. You can find no equivalent in Spenser. Except in their general purity and "maidenliness," Spenser's sonnets are equalled or even surpassed by those of his great contemporaries. But the great ode or *Epithalamion*, which closes the sequence, is without a rival. It exceeds in richness and splendour all compositions of the same kind. It is the most gorgeous jewel in the treasure-house of the Renaissance.

The bridegroom offered this poem as a wedding gift to fair Elizabeth in place of the jewels he could not give her, owing to some untoward accident. This is implied by the rather obscure *Envoi* at the end of the ode:

Song! made in lieu of many ornaments
With which my love should duly have been deckt,
Which cutting off through hasty accidents,
Ye would not stay your due time to expect,
But promist both to recompense,
Be unto her a goodly ornament,
And for short time an endless monument.

Nothing in this magnificent hymn betrays the haste and want of finish for which the poet apologises. We cannot detect the imperfections to which he alludes, unless he means the irregularity of the stanzas, which vary from eighteen to twenty lines, and one unrhymed

line in the last stanza. No poem shows better the richness of his imagination and language, drawn from all sources, ancient and modern, mythological and Christian. And what insight the poem gives into the literary tastes of an epoch when the most pious thoughts could lightly wear a pagan garb!

The poem forms a sequence of twenty-three long stanzas, of a form invented by Spenser. The lines are of unequal length, but every stanza ends in a fourteen-syllable line, which serves, as a refrain or burden, to link up all nature with the bridegroom's rapture:

That all the woods may answer, and their echo ring.

Every hour of the wedding-day is celebrated, from the earliest peep of dawn to the silent, moon-illuminated night.

First we have an invocation to the Muses, whom Spenser loved to honour, and usually invoked when celebrating any noble or illustrious name. But now, he says, he seeks their aid on a more intimate occasion—to help him sing the praise of her who is to be his wife. Let them come at dawn and bring forth with them the nymphs of rivers and forests, and also those of the sea—let all carry garlands of roses and lilies for the bride, and strew the ground everywhere with flowers for fear her tender feet should be hurt by its hardness.

Especially, let the nymphs of the Mulla (i.e. the Awbeg, the river that flows across the poet's estate) and those of Kilcolman Lake, come to the feast, having first brushed their hair and made their faces as clear as their waters.—All this part of the *Epithalamion* is a characteristic blending of mythology and realism. The word "nymphs" should not mislead us; it is merely

meant to throw a veil of poetry over details and persons that would look vulgar and commonplace if not transfigured. And we can recognise in them the young peasant maids and fishermen's daughters on Spenser's domain, who were sure to come in numbers and hail their new lady of the manor:

Ye Nymphs of Mulla, which with careful heed
 The silver scaly trouts do tend full well,
 And greedy pikes which use therein to feed
 (Those trouts and pikes all other do excel),
 And ye likewise, which keep the rushy lake
 Where none do fishes take,
 Bind up the locks the which hang scatter'd light,
 And in his waters, which your mirror make,
 Behold your faces as the crystal bright,
 That when you come whereas my love doth lie,
 No blemish she may spy.

Is this not full of familiar and homely allusions—the invitation to the country maids to comb their hair and wash their faces carefully, the passing reference to the excellent quality of the trout and pikes in the poet's own river?

Now let the bride herself awake and listen to the morning songs of the birds that are first to celebrate the joyful wedding-day. She awakes at last, and the Hours and Graces—by whom the bridesmaids are meant—enter into her bedroom.

The bridegroom himself, with a merry company of young men, comes to seek her, and the little town resounds with the minstrels' music—a wonderful stanza full of the liveliness of a country wedding, with only just a touch of classical reminiscence to enhance and ennoble the scene (nothing save the burden "Hymen, io Hymen," reminds us of Latin epithalamia).

Hark! how the Minstrels gin to shrill aloud
 Their merry music that resounds from far,
 The pipe, the tabor, and the trembling Croud ¹
 That well agree withouten breach or jar.
 But, most of all, the Damsels do delight
 When they their timbrels smite,
 And thereunto do dance and carol sweet,
 That all the senses they do ravish quite:
 The whiles the Boys run up and down the street,
 Crying aloud with strong confusèd noise
 As if it were one voice,
 Hymen, io Hymen, Hymen, they do shout;
 That even to the Heavens their shouting shrill
 Doth reach, and all the firmament doth fill;
 To which the people standing all about,
 As in approvance, do thereto applaud,
 And loud advance her laud;
 And evermore they Hymen, Hymen sing,
 That all the woods them answer, and their echo ring.

At the call of the minstrels the bride now comes out of her bower, as beautiful as Phœbe and, like her, all arrayed in white. With the green garland round her yellow locks she seems "a maiden queen," but so modest in her bearing withal, that she blushes to hear her praises sung aloud and bends her eyes to the ground for fear of meeting the gaze of the admiring people.

The poet does not miss the opportunity of giving a full inventory of her charms. And we have here a splendid stanza which is by itself a complete summing up of his poetry—a true Spenserian stanza, in which the abundant and voluptuous description of the bride's beauty is finally interpreted as the mere outward sign of her perfect virtue. The scene itself is full of suggestion: you have the bridal procession passing along the main street, between two rows of tradesmen's daughters on the steps of their shops, gazing on the bride in silent admiration:

¹ Violin.

Tell me, ye merchants' daughters, did ye see
 So fair a creature in your town before;
 So sweet, so lovely, and so mild as she,
 Adorn'd with beauty's grace and virtue's store?
 Her goodly eyes like Sapphires shining bright,
 Her forehead ivory white,
 Her cheeks like apples which the sun hath rudded,
 Her lips like cherries charming men to bite,
 Her breast like to a bowl of cream uncrudded,
 Her paps like lilies budded,
Her snowy neck like to a marble tower;
And all her body like a palace fair,
Ascending up, with many a stately stair,
To honour's seat and chastity's sweet bower.
 Why stand ye still ye virgins in amaze
 Upon her so to gaze,
 Whiles ye forget your former lay to sing,
 To which the woods did answer, and your echo ring?

Let us pause here to say that in the four lines italicised we find perhaps the most admirable expression of Spenser's Platonic conception of outward beauty which, he says, leads the mind, "with many a stately stair," to the seat of perfect, divine virtue.

Now the procession enters the church, and we have here, in the midst of the gorgeous Hymn, two admirable stanzas from which all mythology is banished to make room for a purely Christian ceremony. And though it surely breathes much more of the Catholic than of the Puritan spirit, the description is so vivid that we seem to see the poet and his bride standing in that sacred building, with pillars adorned with flowers, where the organs loudly play:

And let the roaring Organs loudly play
 The praises of the Lord in lively notes;
 The whiles, with hollow throats,
 The Choristers the joyous Anthem sing,
 That all the woods may answer, and their echo ring!

We see the bride standing before the altar, while the holy priest addresses her and "blesseth her with his two happy hands." We see her blushing with emotion, and made so lovely by the added charm that the very angels (the guardians of the sacred altar) seem to forget their office and stare on her face with wonder at her celestial beauty. But she ignores the admiration with which she is surrounded and devoutly concentrates her whole soul on the religious sacrament that is being accomplished:

Sing, ye sweet Angels, Alleluia sing,
That all the woods may answer, and your echo ring.

But after this ceremony the pagan mood of the festival breaks out once more. In a lively bacchic stanza we have the banquet full of true rustic profusion of meat and wine, and boundless hospitality:

Pour out the wine without restraint or stay,
Pour not by cups but by the belly full,
Pour out to all that wull,
And sprinkle all the posts and walls with wine,
That they may sweat and drunken be withal.
Crown ye God Bacchus with a coronal,
And Hymen also crown with wreaths of wine.

In the meantime, the young men of the town ring the bells and make bonfires, round which they and the maids dance and sing for many hours.

Yet that joyful sunny day—the longest of the year—seems too long to the bridegroom's impatience. He chides the sun for being so slow to plunge into the western waves. He welcomes the evening star, the harbinger of night, when it first appears in the east, leading "all the host of heaven." This is a warning to

the damsels to cease their games and dances—to bring the bride to her bower, and lay her in her bed, all covered with lilies and violets—this is the warning for all singing to cease:

The woods no more shall answer, nor your echo ring.

Then begins the reign of night and silence. But as we are in a troubled country, in that Ireland where night attacks are always possible, the poet utters a long prayer to conjure away all perils, “all sudden sad affrights,” all evil spirits, too, the Puck, or hobgoblins, or mischievous witches, and also the night shrieks of ravens and owls, not forgetting the “unpleasant quire of frogs still croaking,” which in his Kilcolman manor he too often heard from the neighbouring pond.

We now have a chaste and charming vision of nuptial delights enlivened by fancy. Everyone may have seen on ancient hangings and curtains pictures of winged Cupids catching little birds in snares, or wicker cages, whereby are meant the joys of the bridal bed. The poet addresses the winged boys at their merry play, but his long-coveted solitude is troubled by a sudden apparition: the moon has made her appearance, and through the casement throws her rays into the bedroom:

Who is the same, which at my window peeps?
Or whose is that fair face that shines so bright?
Is it not Cinthia, she that never sleeps,
But walks about high heaven all the night?
O! fairest goddess, do thou not envy

My love with me to spy:

For thou likewise didst love, though now unthought,
And for a fleece of wool, which privily
The Latmian shepherd once unto thee brought,

His pleasures with thee wrought.

Therefore to us be favourable now. . . .

A beautiful passage, yet not wholly intelligible unless we realise that Cinthia has a twofold meaning, and designates not only the moon but also the queen, to whom Sir Walter Raleigh had dedicated a long poem under that name. The poet, who remembers his sovereign in the midst of his joys, implores her not to be angry with him for giving his heart to another virgin; he makes bold to remind her that she, too, has felt love (for Leicester), which ought to make her tolerant of lovers. But the allusion can only be "a dark conceit"; in the next lines Cinthia has once again become the mythological deity whom Spenser invokes together with Juno, Hebe, Hymen and the domestic genius, asking them to make his union blessed and fruitful.

Was Spenser really afraid that Queen Elizabeth would be offended by his marriage as though by the desertion of one of her favourites or devotees? It is not very probable. But in thus feigning fear of her wrath, he was promoting himself to the rank of nobler and higher courtiers than he. He assumed, so to say, a patent of nobility, set himself on a level with the Leicesters, Raleighs and Essexes. Even on his marriage night he had to play his part as a laureate devoted to the service of the Virgin Empress.

The end of the Hymn links together, rather profanely, as we should think nowadays, the deities of Olympus, in whom Spenser had only poetical faith, with the Christian God and the saints whom he really worshipped. Once granted that confusion, which after all is mainly verbal, the last stanza has a truly religious ring:

And ye high heavens, the temple of the gods,
 In which a thousand torches flaming bright
 Do burn, that to us wretched earthly clods
 In dreadful darkness lend desired light;
 And all ye powers which in the same remain,
 More than we men can feign!
 Pour out your blessing on us plenteously,
 And happy influence upon us rain,
 That we may raise a large posterity
 Which from the earth, which they may long possess
 With lasting happiness,
 Up to your haughty palaces may mount;
 And, for the guerdon of their glorious merit,
 May heavenly tabernacles there inherit,
 Of blessed Saints for to increase the count.
 So let us rest, sweet love, in hope of this,
 And cease till then our timely joys to sing:
 The woods no more us answer, nor our echo ring.

It is of course impossible to do justice to a great ode in a mere analysis, eked out with a few quotations. The poem is remarkable, not so much for originality in treatment of the subject, as for its copious and inexhaustible flow, for the alacrity with which Spenser catches up all his reminiscences of traditional poetry to adorn his beloved with them and magnify the real circumstances and homely details of a wedding which took place in a small seaport of Ireland, Cork or Youghal, on the 11th of June, 1594.

Even in his most personal poems, where he expresses his feelings most directly—the *Epithalamion* and *Amoretti*—Spenser's genius for idealising his subject remains apparent. Though he sings the praises of his bride, he offers us the picture, not so much of a distinct and individual woman, as of the typical woman on the bridal day. His beloved is perfectly beautiful; none of the features of conventional beauty are wanting to her portrait—her complexion like a blend of lilies and roses, her

fair-coloured hair, her blue eyes: she is the young girl, all blushes, all modesty and shamefastness—without a single irregularity in her looks or person, without one jarring note in the absolute harmony of her perfection. Spenser has surely, according to his promise, made her immortal, but one may wonder whether he has made her truly *live*. It is his own ecstasy and rapture, his lifelong adoration of feminine beauty that he sings at his wedding-time, in a few exquisite sonnets, and in this, the most superb epithalamion that has ever been written.

CHAPTER V

THE PICTORIAL ELEMENTS IN THE "FAIRY QUEEN," AND ITS CONNECTION WITH THE PICTURES, DUMB- SHOWS, PAGEANTS AND MASQUES OF THE TIME.

HOWEVER much alive we may be to the charm of the *Amoretti* or the splendour of the *Epithalamion*, we cannot forget that Spenser is above all the author of the *Fairy Queen*. And it is to this great poem, on which nearly twenty years of his life were spent, though little more than the fourth part of it was written when he died, that we must turn if we are to define his genius. The rest of his works are so many preludes or asides, with the mark of the occasional or temporary upon them. The fundamental characteristics of his poetry are to be looked for in his masterpiece.

Picture Spenser as a born painter who never held a brush in his hand. Fate gave him birth in a country where the plastic arts were not to flourish until nearly two centuries later. Had he been born in Italy he might have been another Titian, a second Veronese. In Flanders, he would have anticipated Rubens or Rembrandt. As it was, Fortune made him a painter in verse, one of the most wonderful that ever lived.

What could he see of the arts, what tapestries, pictures and sculptures? No more interesting question can be asked, though this aspect of his artistic development

has perhaps been more neglected than any. His relations with the Earl of Leicester must have given him excellent opportunities, for Leicester was a distinguished patron of artists, and had filled his castles of Kenilworth and Wanstead, as well as his London residence, with all kinds of works. The catalogue of the pictures in his London house has been preserved for us, though the details do not allow us to say whether we have to do with originals or copies.¹ We find in the list a number of portraits—Leicester himself and the queen, Mary Stuart, Philip of Spain, many lords and ladies, Philip Sidney, his sister the Countess of Pembroke, Lady Rich, famous as his Stella, etc. But there were also religious and allegorical or mythological subjects, Cupid and Venus, a woman asleep whom Cupid threatens with his dart, Diana bathing with her nymphs, Diana and Actæon; a portrait of Faith; an allegory of Occasion and Repentance, etc.

But surely there were also engravings, and tapestries from Arras and Flanders, which would make other more famous pictures known, even to an untravelled Englishman.

What Spenser saw can only be conjectured, but it is obvious that works of art were among the first things to spur his imagination, and play a large part in the composition of the *Fairy Queen*.

The connection between painting and poetry did not, of course, begin with Spenser. It has always existed. "Ut pictura poesis," Horace had already said in the age of Augustus. Chaucer's verse is often closely allied

¹ *Notes and Queries*, 3rd Series, II., pp. 201-2 and 224-5.

to the art of his time. It is impossible to read his descriptions of the Pilgrims in the Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales* without being constantly reminded of the primitive painters — costumes, colours, emblems, gestures, everything denotes the parallelism. But there we have expressive likenesses. Chaucer endeavours to delineate individual characters. He does not aim at plastic beauty, at subtle effects of colouring, nor does he make use of chiaroscuro, or artificial grouping. He does not set and arrange his personages for the pleasure of the eye. He paints his portraits separately, one after another, and hangs them in a line, at random, along the wall.

Nor has he the artist's delight in the colours of a beautiful face or the lines of a harmonious body. We must pass over two centuries, and come to Sidney's *Arcadia* or Spenser's *Fairy Queen* to see that delight suddenly blossoming out in English literature. And its source is not doubtful: we must seek it on the Continent, in Flanders, and above all in Italy, in Italian painting, in Italian poetry itself, so deeply imbued with the enveloping influence of the plastic arts.

The earliest manifestations on English soil are to be looked for in Sidney's *Arcadia*. We know that Sidney had been in Italy and stayed in Venice, where he had his portrait painted by Veronese, and probably visited the aged Titian's studio. This prolonged continental tour instilled a passion for art which is abundantly manifested in his famous romance. His *Arcadia* is a treasure-house of pictorial effects. Sidney is at his best when he minutely describes stuffs, garments, jewels—their folds or changing hues. And he is no less skilful when depicting the

outward changes on the face produced by the feelings of the heart. He constantly vies with the painter.

His delight in mere physical beauty can be shown by his description in verse of Philoclea, as she was seen bathing by Zulmane, who gazes on her from his hiding-place among the reeds. There is nothing in this long lyric which gives the touch of individuality to Philoclea. It is a continuous, enraptured adoration of all the sensuous charms of a beautiful feminine body, a glorification of lines and colours.

Some of Sidney's happiest pages are those given up to descriptions of man's artistic creations, such as the garden of Kalender and the statues or pictures in Kalender's dainty garden house. In passages like these he shows a trained taste, a familiarity with the language of artists or art-critics, and an insight into their hidden intentions.

Many of his most pathetic scenes are presented in such a way that we wonder whether Sidney is not copying from a picture. At any rate, he surely attempts to convey by means of words just those effects which the painter achieves by means of light and shade. Take for example these lines of Book III., chap. iii., where Amphialus, the passionate but unfavoured lover of Philoclea, pays her an undesired visit in the room where she is imprisoned.

First of all he dresses up with the utmost care, in a garment of decorous and symbolic beauty:

"He took a garment more rich than glaring, the ground being black velvet, richly embroidered with great pearl and precious stones, but *they* set so among

certain tufts of cypres, that the cypres was like black clouds through which the stars might yield a dark lustre. About his neck he wore a broad and gorgeous collar, whereof the pieces interchangeably answering, the one was of Diamonds and Pearl set with a white enamel, so as by the cunning of the workman it seemed like a shining ice, and the other piece being of Rubies and Opals, had a fiery glistening, which he thought pictured the two passions of Fear and Desire wherein he was enchained."

After this description of Amphialus's dress we have the attitude of Philoclea:

"And in that sort he went to Philoclea's chamber, whom he found (because her chamber was over-light-some) sitting of that side of her bed which was from the window; which did cast such a shadow upon her as a good Painter would bestow upon Venus when under the trees she bewailed the murder of Adonis: her hands and fingers (as it were) indented one within the other; her shoulder leaning to her bed's head, and over her head a scarf which did eclipse almost half her eyes, which under it fixed their beams upon the wall by, with so steady a manner as if in that place they might well change but not mend their object; and so remained they a good while after his coming in, he not daring to trouble her, nor she perceiving him. . . ."

Surely, if Sidney is not drawing upon some picture he had seen, a painter might here find all the elements of costume, light and shade, and composition ready to his hand.

It is the same with Spenser, in countless stanzas of his *Fairy Queen*. That the first impulse came to him from Sidney is probable. Sidney was deep in his *Arcadia* when Spenser made his acquaintance; he had had many more opportunities than Spenser of coming into touch with pictures, and painters, and art critics. Moreover, it is a fact that in Spenser's *Shepherd's Calendar*, written before his intercourse with Sidney, there is none of that pictorial magnificence for which the *Fairy Queen* is so famous.

The character of the great poem is best illustrated by the name it first bore. As we learn from one of E. Kirke's notes to the Sixth Eclogue of the *Calendar*, it was originally called *Pageants* by the poet and his friends. The *Fairy Queen* is essentially a series of gorgeous decorations, of splendid pageants.

In the first place, Spenser hangs many a tapestry or picture round the walls of the palaces he erected in his master-poem, and complacently describes the subjects therein represented, e.g. the loves of Venus and Adonis on the walls of Castel Joyous (III. i. 34), where he sums up the story which was to be told at fuller length a very few years later by Shakespeare—a licentious theme fitly placed by the poet in the house of unruly pleasure.

Still richer are the tapestries with which he adorns the House of Busirane, the debauched magician; they are at the same time a feast for the eyes and a peril for the soul. Before describing them in detail, he has admirably shown of what perfidious materials, gold and silk, their tissue is woven:

For round about, the walls yclothèd were
 With goodly arras of great majesty,
 Woven with gold and silk, so close and near
 That the rich metal lurkèd privily,
 As feigning to be hid from envious eye;
 Yet here and there, and everywhere, unwares
 It showed itself and shone unwillingly,
 Like a discolour'd Snake, whose hidden snares
 Through the green grass his long bright burnisht back declares.

All the strange loves of the mythological gods are there represented, specially the many loves of Jupiter. Ovid is of course his original, but if you look at Jove's visit to Danaë as painted by Titian (in the Louvre), or at the same scene painted by Correggio, and then read Spenser's stanza, you may well wonder whether he had not one of those pictures before his eyes when he wrote:

Soon after that, into a golden shower
 Himself he chang'd, fair Danaë to view,
 And through the roof of her strong brazen tower
 Did rain into her lap an honey dew;
 The whiles her foolish guard, that little knew
 Of such deceit, kept th' iron door fast barr'd
 And watch'd that none should enter nor issúe;
 Vain was the watch, and bootless all the ward,
 Whenas the God to golden hue himself transfard.

The fine stanzas on Neptune, in the same canto, whether copied by Spenser or of his own invention, are such as the greatest painter might envy for their picturesqueness:

Next unto him was Neptune picturèd,
 In his divine resemblance wondrous like;
 His face was rugged, and his hoary head
 Droppèd with brackish dew: his threeforkt pike
 He sternly shook, and therewith fierce did strike
 The raging billows, that on every side
 They trembling stood and made a long broad dike
 That his swift chariot might have passage wide
 Which four great Hippodames did draw in teamwise tied.

*His sea-horses did seem to snort amain,
 And from their nostrils blow the briny stream
 That made the sparkling waves to smoke again
 And flame with gold; but the white foamy cream
 Did shine with silver and shoot forth his beam.
 The God himself did pensive seem and sad,
 And hung adown his head as he did dream;
 For privy love his breast empiercèd had,
 Nor ought but dear Bisaltis aye could make him glad.*

It is difficult for word-painting to go further than this. Yet in these passages Spenser is supposed to be describing pictures, and it may seem natural that his verse should follow the artist's treatment of the subject. But even when purporting to give us characters from the life, he still follows the methods of the painter.

Take his celebrated portrait of Belphebe, the divine huntress, as she is seen in the forest by Braggadochio and Trompart. It is a picture on the grandest scale, with an extraordinary profusion of colours and details, filling ten stanzas—one for her face, one for her eyes, one for her forehead and mouth, one for her looks and smiles, one for her tunic, one for her buskins, one for her legs, one for her spear, bow and baldrick, one for her hair, and so on. There is scarcely a detail in all those stanzas that could not be expressed by a painter or sculptor, that does not remind us of the portraits or statues of Diana. Even that beautiful stanza which conveys most vividly of all the sense of life and motion is one that art could well reproduce:

*Her yellow locks, crisped like golden wire,
 About her shoulders weren loosely shed,
 And, when the wind among them did inspire,
 They waved like a pennon wide dispread,
 And low behind her back were scatterèd:*

And, whether art it were or heedless hap,
 As through the flow'ring forest fast she fled,
 In her rude hairs sweet flowers themselves did lap,
 And flourishing fresh leaves and blossoms did enwrap.

It is the same in the poet's grotesque or monstrous descriptions as in those which aim at absolute beauty. The grotesque is only the reverse of the beautiful. It belongs no less to the painter's province and is dealt with in the same fashion.

Read Spenser's description of the formidable dragon against which the Red-Cross Knight has to fight. It is, in a way, a mere pasteboard monster, one to frighten little children, but it has been transformed into a thing of art by a great master of colouring. It takes the poet no less than seven stanzas to complete the portrait. There is not space to recount all—its shape, its size, its scales, its wings, its tail, its talons, its jaws. Suffice it to read the stanza on its eyes:

His blazing eyes, like two bright shining shields,
 Did burn with wrath, and sparkled living fire;
 As two broad Beacons, set in open fields,
 Send forth their flames far off to every shire,
 And warning give that enemies conspire
 With fire and sword the region to invade;
 So flam'd his eyne with rage and rancorous ire;
 But far within, as in a hollow glade,
 Those glaring lamps were set that made a dreadful shade.

Here, it is true, we have a comparison which is only possible to the poet. He only could compare the dragon's eyes to two broad beacons. Yet even here we feel somehow he is striving to match by means of an image the impression of lurid light conveyed by some striking picture that haunted his remembrance.

As a rule, Spenser's descriptions of individuals are

shorter than those of Belphebe or the Dragon. He often gives us a whole vision in a single stanza, with perfect knowledge of the use of light and shade, or of the means by which a figure should be set off by its surroundings and the background. As an example of this, we may quote his well-known picture of Una or Truth as a nun, resting in a wood:

One day, nigh weary of the irksome way,
 From her unhasty beast she did alight,
 And on the grass her dainty limbs did lay
 In secret shadow, far from all men's sight:
 From her fair head her fillet she undight,
 And laid her stole aside. Her angel's face
 As the great eye of heaven shined bright,
 And made a sunshine in the shady place;
 Did never mortal eye behold such heavenly grace.

For similar effects of chiaroscuro, which are abundant in the *Fairy Queen*, the reader may be referred to the coming of bright resplendent Duessa into the dwelling of Night, to the entrance of Red-Cross with his shining armour into the dark cavern of Error, or to the white beauty of naked Serena, surrounded by black savages, or to the deep cave wherein Mammon hides his treasures, which was only lit up by the reflection of its roof, floor and walls of gold:

But a faint shadow of uncertain light:
 Such as a lamp whose life does fade away,
 Or as the moon clothèd with cloudy night,
 Does show to him that walks in fear and sad affright.

Spenser is equally successful in his allegorical compositions. He paints them with the exuberant verve and unwearied copiousness of Rubens. One of the most famous instances is that in which he represents the wedding of the Thames and the Medway, according

to the mythological convention which transforms rivers into human personages, either masculine or feminine. Here the Thames is the bridegroom and the Medway the bride. The married couple are painted with extreme care. The faces are of secondary importance, as there are no moral characteristics to set off, but the stuffs and accessories are wonderfully rich and appropriate. Take for instance the portrait of the Medua, or Medway, and note the liquid beauty of her robe:

Then came the Bride, the lovely Medua came,
Clad in a vesture of unknowen gear
And uncouth fashion, yet her well became,
That seem'd like silver, sprinkled here and there
With glitt'ring spangs that did like stars appear,
And wav'd upon, like water Chamelot,
To hide the metal, which yet everywhere
Betray'd itself, to let men plainly wot
It was no mortal work that seem'd and yet was not.

The description of her hair is equally felicitous:

Her goodly locks adown her back did flow
Unto her waist, with flowers bescatterèd,
The which ambrosial odours forth did throw
To all about, and all her shoulders spread
As a new spring; and likewise on her head
A chapelet of sundry flowers she wore
From under which the dewy humour shed
Did trickle down her hair, like to the hoar
Congealèd little drops which do the morn adore.¹

As is natural, the Thames and Medway stand in the foreground. They loom large on the immense scene, and behind them unrolls through many stanzas the endless procession of illustrious rivers and streams that have come for the bridal day under the guidance of the mythological sea-gods, Neptune and Amphitrite, with

¹ Adorn.

their descendants, Ocean and Tethys. The whole is a fresco broad enough to cover the roof or walls of an imperial palace.

But the poet does not only vie with tapestries and pictures in his poem. All that we have seen hitherto is motionless and arrested as on a canvas. It might be the literal transcription of some painting. But Spenser often takes for his models personages who are seen to pass before us one by one, making symbolic gestures and assuming a particular expression typifying the abstraction they are meant to represent. We may at times, it is true, hesitate to pronounce whether he was more inspired in these instances by pictures or by pageants. It is so in his famous description of the Capital Sins, which for artists and writers in the Middle Ages was a well-worn theme. All the embodiments, attitudes and attributes of those sins had been illustrated many times before Spenser took them in hand. They are found, for instance, in Chaucer's *Parson's Tale* or Sermon, and in Langland's *Piers Plowman*. Spenser did little more than gather these familiar representations together for a great scene in his House of Pride (Book I. Canto iv.). But he ordered them in a procession or solemn march, which makes the passage very similar to a pageant.

It is the same with his representation of the seasons and months in the fragment of his Seventh Book. Here, again, he shows a marvellous wealth of words and colours, fearing neither length nor monotony. He surely vies with the magnificent pageants he has seen with his own eyes, wherein the greater the number of the

actors the stronger and livelier their impression upon the lookers-on. But here we have the proof that it is impossible for one of the arts to match another on its own ground. Here Spenser almost goes beyond the limits of poetry, which can only show personages and details one by one, while in a real pageant all can be embraced in one glance, though of course each figurant in turn takes on a special importance when coming into nearer view. In this pageant of Nature it takes him twenty stanzas to present all the personages, first the four Seasons, then (with magnificent contempt of all monotony) each of the twelve months, then Day and Night, then the Hours, then Life and Death. But the effect in his verse, however rich and varied, remains after all very inferior to that of a real pageant, since it can only give a *successive*, instead of a *simultaneous* impression of the scene. Spenser has splendidly illustrated the almanac or calendar—yet we feel all the time that a more satisfying entertainment would be to see the procession itself; that poetry, after all, requires more intellectual substance, less outward display, that it ought not to proceed by enumeration, however splendid the pageant may be, but by an appeal to the feelings or, by less material means, to the imagination.

Neither pictures nor pageants make up the whole of Spenser's models. He was also influenced by the stage, more especially by the morality which was not yet quite dead, and most of all by a species of spectacular entertainment much relished in his time, and which may be called the moral dumb-show or pantomime. Here we have one more element added to the

preceding ones: the actors express their feelings by means of regulated changes in their looks and gestures, without having recourse to words.

The dumb-show, then in close relation to the morality, resembled it in being mainly allegorical. The silence kept by the performers obliged them to make their meaning clear by striking effects of costume, gesture and grimace. It was also akin to those *tableaux vivants* much relished by the public of that day. The effect was much the same as if the figures in a picture had suddenly been endowed with life. It often happened that an interpreter explained the subject to the public as the show went on, telling them the meaning of each symbol, interpreting each attitude in turn.

Dumb-shows were then frequent. They were often used on the stage as preambles to the plays. We find one, very happily contrived, at the beginning of every act of *Gorboduc*, the first classical tragedy. Gascoigne's *Jocasta*, Kyd's celebrated *Spanish Tragedy*, Greene's *James IV.*, Peele's *Battle of Alcazar*, are only a few instances of the plays into which dumb-shows were introduced, either before or during the period when Spenser was composing the *Fairy Queen*.

Here is another example which comes just a little later—it belongs to the year 1598, and is found at the beginning of the Second Act of *A Warning to Fair Women*. The play is among the most realistic. It is the representation of a real crime of the day, the adulterous adventures of a certain Browne with a Mrs. Saunders, assisted by a Mrs. Drury and the man Roger. Browne is on the point of murdering the husband, Mr. Saunders.

A dumb-show first shows us the struggle in his breast between his good and evil instincts. The description of the dumb-show is as follows:

“The Furies enter first, bringing in the adulterous lovers, and dancing a soft dance to a solemn music. Then comes in Lasciviousness before Brown who brings Mrs. Saunders in a black veil, while Chastity all in white softly pulls her back by the arm. Then comes in Mrs. Drury followed by Roger who endeavours to repel Chastity. They thus turn round the stage and then sit down before a table. Lasciviousness drinks to Brown, Brown drinks to Mrs. Saunders. Lasciviousness kisses Mrs. Saunders who drives away Chastity. Chastity goes out wringing her hands. The Furies kiss one another. . . . Tragedy throws a spell over the lovers who fall asleep. Then Murder comes in and stains their hands with blood. Browne awakes with a start, draws his sword and runs out. . . .”

If you eke out these dry indications and call up the players' vivid mimicry, you will turn without feeling any real difference to the numerous moral pantomimes scattered about in the *Fairy Queen*. I will content myself with pointing out the struggle of Sir Guyon against Furor and Occasion, in the fourth canto of the Second Book. The passage is a long one, but in that allegory, intended to show how Anger is born of Occasion and can only be quelled when the occasion that gave rise to it has first been mastered (a rather trite moral), what strikes us is the concrete, visible, palpable character of every incident, the obvious symbolism of the personages and of every gesture and

grimace they make, the ease with which the least detail might have been expressed by an actor in a dumb-show.

We see a madman pulling a handsome stripling by the hair and beating him so sorely that the blood flows from his side. Behind the madman stalks a wicked hag in filthy ragged robes, with a lame leg that compels her to stay her steps on a staff; her locks grow all before her head, which is all bald behind (for you know that Occasion must be caught by the forelock). The hag incites the madman to deal more and more cruelly with his victim:

Sometimes she raught him stones, wherewith to smite,
Sometimes her staff, though it her one leg were,
Withouten which she could not go upright. . . .

Sir Guyon attempts to rescue the victim, but then the madman turns fiercely against him.

And smote, and bit, and kickt, and scratch'd, and rent,
And did he wist not what in his avengement.

The valiant knight is overthrown in the contest. Whereupon the wise pilgrim who accompanies Guyon cries upon him to master the hag first, as that is the only way of overcoming the madman, her son. Guyon then catches her by the forelock and throws her to the ground:

Yet n'old she stent
Her bitter railing and foul revilément,
But still provok'd her son to wreake her wrong,
But natheless he ¹ did her still torment,
And, catching hold of her ungratious tongue,
Thereon an iron lock did fasten firm and strong.

Then whenas use of speech was from her reft,
With her two crookèd hands she signs did make,
And beckon'd him, the last help she had left;
But he that last left help away did take,

¹ Guyon.

And both her hands fast bound unto a stake
 That she note stir. Then gan her son to fly
 Full fast away, and did her quite forsake,
 But Guyon after him in hast did hie,
 And soon him overtook in sad perplexity.

Guyon overcomes the now powerless madman, and binds him with a hundred chains. But the conquered brute still shows his madness by fearful grimaces:

Yet his great iron teeth he still did grind
 And grimly gnash, threat'ning revenge in vain;
 His burning eyen, whom bloody streaks did stain,
 Starèd full wide, and threw forth sparks of fire;
 And more for rank despite than for great pain,
 Shak'd his long locks colour'd like copper-wire,
 And bit his tawny beard to show his raging ire.

Is not this entire scene one that Spenser might have seen performed, or, conversely, one that might easily be given on the stage, after simply copying every attitude and every grimace from his verse?

This is Spenser's habitual manner. He makes the abstract concrete and material. He personifies it like the painter or the actor. And he is so much carried away by his pleasure in these scenes of his making, that he often half forgets their symbolism or moral import. The moral lesson varies in weight and significance; at times it is truly childish. We are apt to remember the image and forget the lesson it ought to convey. Spenser resembles in this the great allegorical painters of the Renaissance, on whose pictures we gaze not for edification, not even to learn their precise meaning, but for the perfection of their forms and colours.

When Primaticcio—the picture is in the Louvre—shows us Vulcan's smithy, we scarcely think of the god of mythology, but our eyes are arrested by the

herculean smiths letting their heavy hammers down on to the anvil. Much the same effect is produced upon us by the House or Forge of Care into which Spenser introduces us.

Again, the poet intends to offer us a study of the human passions, expressed in concrete images. He would show us the sufferings of jealousy, the tortures of a lover who is haunted by thoughts of faithlessness and treason through a sleepless night. But he soon forgoes his analysis of these passions for the sake of the merely picturesque. The scene before us would serve just as well for a description of the evil effects of insomnia, of fever, of a nightmare, or even toothache. But if we are content to regard it merely as a spectacle, Spenser's House of Care becomes wonderfully vivid.

Sir Scudamour, the lover of fair Amoret, with heart full of bitter thoughts, is travelling away from her whom he believes to be false to him. A heavy rain forces him to seek shelter in a poor cottage for the night. The supposed cottage is really the House of Care, and the story of the night that Scudamour spends under its roof is figured forth in several successive pictures.

First the place itself: a smithy hollowed out in a steep hillside. The site is as unpleasant as can be:

And fast beside a little brook did pass
Of muddy water that like puddle stank,
By which few crookèd sallows grew in rank.

Inside, Scudamour first descries the master-smith himself, who is Care personified. He is described at proper length, with minute inspection of body, face, garments, hands and fingers:

There ent'ring in, [he] found the goodman self
 Full busily unto his work ybent;
 Who was to weet a wretched wearish elf,
 With hollow eyes and rawbone cheeks forspent,
 As if he had in prison long been pent;
 Full black and grisly did his face appear,
 Besmear'd with smoke that nigh his eye-sight blent;
 With rugged beard and hoary shaggèd hair,
 The which he never went to comb, or comely shear.

Rude was his garment, and to rags all rent,
 Ne better had he ne for better carèd:
 With blistre'd hands amongst the cinders brent,
 And fingers filthy with long nails unparèd,
 Right fit to rend the food on which he farèd.
 His name was Care, a blacksmith by his trade,
 That neither day nor night from working sparèd,
 But to small purpose iron wedges made;
 These be unquiet thoughts that careful minds invade.

After this portrayal of the central figure, who represents both the aspects of Care, being at once the author and the victim of troublous thoughts, comes the picture of his assistants grouped together. This could hardly be more striking:

In which his work he had six servants prest
 About the Anvil standing evermore
 With huge great hammers, that did never rest
 From heaping strokes which thereon sousèd sore:
 All six strong grooms, but one than other more;
 For by degrees they all were disagreed,
 So likewise did the hammers which they bore
 Like bells in greatness orderly succeed,
 That he which was the last the first did far exceed.

This last figure is of such tremendous bulk that Spenser gives him a stanza to himself:

He like a monstrous Giant seem'd in sight,
 Far passing Bronteus or Pyracmon great,
 The which in Lipari do day and night
 Frame thunderbolts for Jove's avengeful threat.
 So dreadfully he did the anvil beat,
 That seem'd to dust he shortly would it drive:

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So huge his hammer, and so fierce his heat,
That seem'd a rock of Diamond it could rive
And rend asunder quite, if he thereto list strive.

A series of *tableaux vivants*, or pantomimic motions, now follow. First Scudamore is described watching the strange scene from the threshold and seeking to discover what their work can be; but all in vain, for they hammer on with frightful noise without looking up or hearing his words.

Next we see Scudamore lying down on the floor in his armour, and vainly trying to sleep—here we have a very expressive pantomime again:

There lay Sir Scudamour long while expecting
When gentle sleep his heavy eyes would close;
Oft changing sides, and oft new place electing,
Where better seem'd he mote himself repose;
And oft in wrath he thence again uprose,
And oft in wrath he laid him down again.
But wheresoe'er he did himself dispose,
He by no means could wish'd ease obtain:

So every place seem'd painful and each changing vain.

Thirdly, as Scudamore begins to doze, one of the smith's men raps him upon his headpiece with his iron mall, so that he

Lightly started up as one affray'd,
Or as if one him suddenly did call.

And last, when out of sheer weariness he falls into a heavy slumber, troubled by nightmares, the master-smith himself still more cruelly intervenes:

With that the wicked carle, the master Smith,
A pair of red-hot iron tongs did take
Out of the burning cinders, and therewith
Under his side him nipt; that, forc'd to wake,
He felt his heart for very pain to quake,
And started up aveng'd for to be
On him the which his quiet slumber brake:
Yet, looking round about him, none could see;
Yet did the smart remain, though he himself did flee.

I must apologise for this long analysis and for so many quotations from an episode familiar to all readers. But I trust that they have served to bring out the most important thing in Spenser's art—his extraordinary power of impressing the eye. While it would be idle to pretend that Spenser here contributes anything whatsoever to psychology, or to a keen study of the jealous mind, who can fail to acknowledge that these scenes and characters, born of the poet's imagination, have imprinted themselves as deeply upon his memory as any picture, any spectacle could have possibly done?

And throughout this immense poem Spenser's method never varies. The *Fairy Queen* is nothing but a succession of similar visions without much moral or intellectual value, but all of them bearing the same strange vivid impress. The entire romance, from the first page to the last, might easily be cut up to form an immense gallery of separate pictures, and we should lose but little of its substance, still less of its poetic beauties. The *Fairy Queen* contains twenty thousand lines, and it would be impossible of course to go on summarising them in this way. But the analysis of a single canto may be given as one more example—the first canto of the First Book will serve our purpose as well as any other.

The canto opens with two portraits:

1. That of the Red-Cross Knight pricking on the plain, with his arms and shield, mounted on a steed chiding his bit.
2. That of the Lady Una upon a snow-white ass, her head shrouded in a black stole, followed by her Dwarf, lagging far behind.

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The plain changes into a forest where they are driven to shelter themselves from the storm, and the description of the wide forest, with its various trees, makes up the second scene.

The third one is the Cave of Error, "a hollow cave amid the thickest woods," which lies before the travellers on their path.

Then we have the fine pictorial effect as the knight enters the dark cavern:

... Forth unto the darksome hole he went,
And looked in: his glist'ning armour made
A little glooming light, much like a shade,
By which he saw the ugly monster plain.

Next comes a life-size portrait of the monster, and here Spenser imitates the most grotesque and horrible imaginings of the Middle Ages, the gargoyles of the old cathedrals:

Half like a serpent horribly display'd
But t'other half did women's shape retain,
Most loathsome, filthy, foul, and full of vile disdain.

And, as she lay upon the dirty ground,
Her huge long tail her den all overspread,
Yet was in knots and many boughts upwound,
Pointed with mortal sting.

She is made still more frightful by her innumerable reptilian brood, the thousand young ones sucking her poisonous dugs.

Then follows a long description of the fight between the knight and the monster—full of the crude symbolism we all have seen in old engravings. Gripped by the knight, the dragon spews out of her filthy maw a flood of poison, full of great lumps of flesh. Her

vomit is full of books and papers, mixed with loathly blind toads,

[That] creeping sought way in the weedy grass,
as rank as the creatures bred by the slime of the Nile.

At one moment the warrior, overcome by the deadly fumes, is assailed by the hideous spawn of serpents that come out of the mother's belly,

Which swarming all about his legs did crawl;
and when finally he has cleft the monster's head from her body, the disgusting brood begin to suck the mother's blood, till they swell out and burst, killed by the hellish venom.

After sating us with this disgusting spectacle, the poet suddenly changes the scene and the actors. Forest, cavern and dragon are left behind. We meet on the way an aged sire who has all the outward appearance of a holy hermit, with hoary hair and bare feet, eyes bent on the ground, while he prays and knocks his breast.

He leads the travellers to his cabin, the stillness of which is in strong contrast with the preceding scene—like the sudden and striking change that we may remember having seen in some well-planned opera:

A little lowly Hermitage it was
Down in a dale, hard by a forest's side,
Far from resort of people that did pass
In travel to and fro: a little wide
There was an holy chapel edified
Wherein the Hermit duly wont to say
His holy things each morn and eventide;
Thereby a crystal stream did gently play
Which from a sacred fountain wellèd forth alway.

But during the night the humble hermit proves to be a black magician. The scene is now his study, where

he is discovered practising horrible enchantments, calling up legions of spirits, one of whom he sends to Morpheus, amid the bowels of the earth. The next scene represents Morpheus' house, and depicts in a sort of dumb-show the spirit's arrival and his many idle attempts to awake the sleeping god.

I stop here, for the last few stanzas of the canto contain more narrative than descriptions, though from them, too, several pictures might easily be taken. But what we have seen is sufficient to illustrate the character of the poem. The pictorial qualities of the *Fairy Queen* are not accidental; they are the rule; they dominate throughout and leave the other merits of the poem in shadow.

But there was yet one more type of spectacle which influenced the poet in his writings, i.e. the mask. It will be better to leave this till the next chapter, when we shall consider the *Fairy Queen* from a broader point of view and endeavour to convey the atmosphere of the poem as a whole.

CHAPTER VI

THE "FAIRY QUEEN" AND THE ATMOSPHERE OF THE POEM AS A WHOLE

IF the portraits, scenes and decorations that abound in the *Fairy Queen* were studied outside their setting, we might easily come to the conclusion that the poem was made up of a variety of pictures having no more connection between them than the countless paintings in any gallery. The subjects of these pictures, when taken one by one, seem strangely heterogeneous. They come from all the corners of poetry and legend. The Middle Ages, with their allegories or moralities, with their romances of chivalry, mainly from the Arthurian cycle, there meet with classical mythology, as it could be seen through the eyes of the Renaissance. One would think that all the poets before Spenser had agreed to bring him some gift or other: Homer, Lucretius, Virgil and Ovid, the authors of the *Romaunt of the Rose*, Chaucer, Langland, Lydgate, Malory, Stephen Hawes and Sackville, Ariosto and Tasso, to name only the greatest of his predecessors. Take merely two successive cantos of the same book and you will find they contain reminiscences of the grotto of Polyphemus, of "Beauty and the Beast," of the *Adventures of Diana*, of a fairy-tale analogous to that of the *Blue Bird*. Elsewhere you see a Tristram of Lyonesse disguised as a

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sort of Robin Hood. Here you have a scene of cannibalism inspired by the stories of the sea-adventures of the day, there an adaptation of the romance of *Daphnis and Chloe*. The classical Hades lies close to the House of Holiness, not far from the dwelling-place of the three theological virtues: Faith, Hope and Charity. Into one crucible, Spenser pours Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and the Arthurian legend, *Orlando Furioso* and the *Romaunt of the Rose*.

We have, moreover, stated that this very variety of subjects is, as it were, multiplied by the use of different artistic methods that are scarcely less varied in their origin. Spenser (as I have tried to show) vies in turn with the painter of portraits or of frescoes, with the pageant, with the morality, or the pantomime. But there was another spectacle of his times which, better than all the rest, can serve to show how Spenser's imagination was haunted by his visual experience. That spectacle is the mask, a dramatic entertainment that grew out of the simpler pageant, and, towards the end of the sixteenth century, became the most sumptuous and elaborate form of entertainment. The mask, which is ancestor to the modern opera, was not, it is true, to reach its full development in England until after Spenser's death, when, during the reign of James I., an Inigo Jones might contrive the scenery and machines, while a Ben Jonson wrote the verses and a Campion the music. But it was already much relished and very magnificently staged under Elizabeth; and in it Spenser could find, combined in one harmonious feast for all the senses, the manifold elements of which the *Fairy Queen* consists. In the history of the mask Spenser holds

an intermediate and central position. From it he drew the inspiration for his poem—did he not find allegory, mythology, romance and pastoral already combined in the mask and ready to his hand? But his great poem could also furnish in its turn some of the most sumptuous models and, above all, one of the most powerful incentives to the imagination of the mask-writers who came after him.

His *Fairy Queen* might be described as “a poetic rendering of the masks of his time, which made that short-lived enchantment immortal by transcribing it into verse.” Spenser was to keep the mask’s gorgeous scenery, the scenic movement and changes, the actors’ gestures and mimicry. He was, moreover, to reproduce the alternatives of mask and antimask, that is, of beautiful and grotesque. Lastly, he gives an equivalent for the stage-music in his harmonious stanzas.

It is of great importance for a poet to find already devised and elaborated the frame wherein he will bring to life the visions of his own imagination. He is thus not only assured of readers who are sympathetic—willing to follow him, willing to be led on by his fancy—but he himself has the advantage of seeing, as it were, with his bodily eye, the land through which he means to guide them. Spenser had really *seen* his fairy country when he was a spectator of some Elizabethan mask. Thus did the unsubstantial visions of his dreams assume an existence, a substance, a shape and outline, like those given by players to the play, no matter how fantastical. Hence it is that the ideal scenery wherein his characters are to act and move takes on that sort

of reality which the engineers of an opera give to the phantasmagoria which they make visible, and consequently credible, so long as the scene lasts. The surprising changes of scene in the *Fairy Queen* also succeed one another as in some ingenious opera which does away with the fatigue of journeys from place to place, yet never leaves us with a sense of the impossible.

It is true that similar effects had already been produced by Ariosto in his *Orlando Furioso*, and Spenser, it might be said, merely followed in Ariosto's steps. But there is just this difference: that Ariosto ironically commented to the reader upon the very enchantments which he offered to their sight. He did not mean them to be taken seriously. Hear how he introduces one of his wonderful adventures:

"When a man travels far from his native land, he sees things very different from those he had believed in before; but when he wishes to tell them afterwards, he is held a liar and finds everyone incredulous. The foolish vulgar people only believe what they see and grasp—this only is evident for them. I therefore think that persons without experience will add no faith to my stories. Whether I find few or many incredulous readers, I don't care. I pay no attention to what ignorant people may say."

This bantering is foreign to Spenser. He, on the contrary, presents his visions to us with such gravity that he almost infects us with his own apparent faith. On these occasions his Platonism comes to his help. Had not Plato given him the conviction that what we call reality is nothing more than the shadow of the ideal which alone is true and alone exists?

Besides, Spenser lives at a marvellous time in the world's history, when the limits of the unknown are constantly being further removed, when new continents, new seas, strange peoples are heard of almost daily, when the very skies and stars are being changed and added to by the discovery of new laws, of, yes, another hemisphere, where the wildest fancies seem surpassed by mere reality. How earnest his voice, protesting against those who may call his fairy kingdom a mere lie:

Right well I wote, most mighty Sovereign,
That all this famous antique history
Of some th' abundance of an idle brain
Will judgèd be and painted forgery
Rather than matter of just memory;
Sith none that breatheth living air does know
Where is that happy land of Faëry,
Which I so much do vaunt, yet no where show,
But vouch antiquities which no body can know.

But let that man with better sense advize
That of the world least part to us is red,
And daily how through hardy enterprize
Many great Regions are discoverèd
Which to late age were never mentionèd.
Who ever heard of th' Indian Peru?
Or who in venturous vessel measurèd
The Amazon huge river, now found true?
Or fruitfulest Virginia who did ever view?

Yet all these were, where no man did them know,
Yet have from wisest ages hidden been;
And later times things more unknown shall show,—
Why then should witless man so much misween
That nothing is but that which he hath seen?
What if within the Moon's fair shining sphere,
What if in every other star unseen
Of other worlds he happily should hear,
He wonder would much more; yet such to some appear.

B. II. Dedication, st. 1-3.

That fair country is so real to him that he walks about

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it like an explorer. He speaks of it as a traveller, by turns weary with the long road and revived by the beauty of the prospects:

The ways through which my weary steps I guide
In this delightful land of Faëry
Are so exceeding spacious and wide
And sprinkled with such sweet variety
Of all that pleasant is to ear or eye,
That I, nigh ravisht with rare thoughts' delight,
My tedious travel do forget thereby;
And when I gin to feel decay of might,
It strength to me supplies, and cheers my dullèd spright.
B. VI., Dedication, st. 1.

It is true that he was not the first to visit it. Others had explored it in part before him—the romancers of the Round Table, the authors of the chivalric books. Each of them had traversed some district of that wide country, and Malory, who had collected many diverse legends in his *Morte d'Arthur*, had made several provinces into a great kingdom, one, however, which he suggested rather than described. Ariosto also, though a flippant and much-diverted traveller, had pointed out many of its wonders. As Spenser came after them, his geography often reminds us of theirs.

His view of fairyland differs chiefly from the others in this: that he insists more upon the features of the landscape. It seems also to owe much of its stronger relief to the hazards of his own life, to the twenty years he passed in that Ireland where he saw the magnanimous English knights (that was his point of view) striving by strength of arms to kill the monsters of the land and dint into a wild people their own virtues by many a sword-stroke. There can be no doubt that Ireland, with its waste tracts and incessant perils, gave

him his background for many of his descriptions. He has repeatedly called the island "the savage soil," and its inhabitants "the salvage nation." Of the horrors that might be witnessed by him in the much-vexed island we have more than one example in his prose pamphlet, his *View of the Present State of Ireland*. This is how he describes the condition of Munster after "the late wars":

"Notwithstanding that the same was a most rich and plentiful country, full of corn and cattle, that you would have thought they would have been able to stand long, yet ere one year and a half they were brought to such wretchedness, as that any stony heart would have rued the same. Out of every corner of the woods and glens they came creeping forth upon their hands, for their legs could not bear them; they looked like anatomies of death, they spake like ghosts crying out of their graves; they did eat of the dead carrions, happy were they if they could find them, yea, and one another soon after, insomuch as the very carcasses they spared not to scrape out of their graves; and if they found a plot of water-cresses or shamrocks, there they flocked as to a feast for the time, yet not able long to continue therewithal; that in short space there were none almost left, and a most populous and plentiful country suddenly made void of man or beast."

Or take this glimpse: one could search the whole of the *Fairy Queen* for anything quite so wild and savage:

"At the execution of a notable traitor at Limerick, I saw an old woman which was his foster-mother, take up his head, whilst he was quartered, and sucked up all the blood running thereout, saying, that the earth

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was not worthy to drink it, and therewith also steeped her face and breast, and tore her hair, crying out and shrieking most terribly."

Or take, again, the passage in *Colin Clout* where the poet enumerates all the plagues rife in Ireland, but happily absent from England. If you do away with the negatives, you have a summary view of the wretched country, plagued by leprosy and famine, by the raging sword, by nightly border raids, and hues and cries; where only wailing is heard, where ravenous wolves destroy the good man's hope, and fell outlaws frighten the forest ranger.

Thus it is that Spenser had more than memories of old books or dream visions to draw upon for his pictures of the wide and perilous enchanted regions over which his heroes went in quest of adventures. His scenes are a blending of poetical tradition and direct observation; thus he prevents the imaginary from fading away into nothingness and the real from assuming a prosaic, matter-of-fact appearance.

What an immense deserted country! how far away and long ago it seems! For days and days the knights wander over desolate tracts, riding over hills and dales, champagnes and forests, without meeting with a single living creature. They long

... travel through wide wasteful ground
That nought but desert wilderness showeth around.

II. vii. 2.

The forests are numerous and boundless, and errant knights are lost in their depth,

For nought but woods and forests far and wide
That all about did close the compass of [their] eye.

VI. iv. 24.

If human beings are scarce or non-existent, wild beasts abound:

At length they come into a forest wide,
Where hideous horror and sad trembling sound
Full grisly seem'd: therein they long did ride,
Yet tract of living creature none they found
Save bears, lions and bulls which roam'd them around.

And yet more monstrous beings await them. At the bottom of this dark cavern, in the very centre of the wood, lies the Dragon of Error, sheltered from the light of day. Elsewhere a savage gorilla-like man is seen, carrying off some hapless lady in his hairy arms. The passer-by witnesses other scenes, perhaps not quite so horrible, but no less strange. He sees some knight flying, with panting breath, from invisible pursuers, his hair standing up on end with fright; or, again, some marvellously beautiful lady whom fear lends wings to fly over bush and broom. Or, catching a glimpse of the nymph Belphœbe, riding past like lightning as she hunts in the woods, he feels half terrified by her divine strength, half enraptured of her celestial beauty. Many other mysterious beings haunt these unexplored regions—here assemble fauns and satyrs, the subjects of Silvanus, a horned race with goat's legs—there you have black savages engaged upon some appalling superstitious rite.

Now a quiet hermitage suddenly appears on the border of a wood, or there rises among the trees the smoke of a mean cottage where a hateful witch is at her wicked spells:

There in a gloomy hollow glen she found
A little cottage, built of sticks and reeds
In homely wise and wall'd with sods around;

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In which a witch did dwell, in loathly weeds
And wilful want, all careless of her needs;
So choosing solitary to abide
Far from all neighbours, that her devilish deeds
And hellish arts from people she might hide
And hurt far off unknown whom ever she envied.

III. vii. 5-6.

Now you have a still meaner cottage, which proves to be a sort of smuggler's or robber's den. In a darksome recess a blind old woman tells her beads without ceasing, while, in the depth of night, a man knocks at the door, bearing on his back a heavy load of stolen goods.

There are no cities in this vast region. Once only, in the distance, we see the crenellated walls of the town where Una's father reigns, while round about a fearsome dragon spreads solitude and desolation. But suddenly, as if at the touch of a wizard's wand, a towered castle springs up from the ground. Some stronghold perhaps, with thick stone walls and portcullis; or perhaps a magnificent palace wherein some sensual magician has gathered all the treasures of art together and ordered sumptuous pageants; or perhaps, again, the mystic dwelling of mere abstractions, or, with a lightning-like transformation, the mythological garden of Adonis, the voluptuous bowers of the courtesan Acrasia.

Elsewhere the solid earth ends: we are on the shore of a sea; the god Proteus is being borne over the waters in his chariot, or is dragging some unfortunate lady down to his mysterious green-lit kingdom under the sea. Or the ocean is stormy, its waves beat against steep rocks; the boat that dares affront its rage is assailed by terrors on every side; the waters are peopled with sea-monsters.

It is a world where wonder is habitual, where the unexpected is the rule. After a time, one becomes acclimatised and accepts the chimeras of dreams and nightmares like natural things. The passage from one place to another is achieved without any effort, even as on the stage a brief lowering of the footlights makes the most surprising change of scenery possible.

A subtle thread, as in our dreams, sometimes connects the most distant visions. The famous episode of Mammon is a good instance of such phantasmagoria. Sir Guyon first catches sight of an uncouth old man telling his gold in a gloomy glade. He is led by him through a dark hole into the bowels of the earth, where he is made to visit the grisly miser's subterranean domain; his house with many rooms, one full of huge iron chests, another where the golden metal is being melted in a hundred furnaces, all burning bright. Thence they pass through a gate into a place as solemn as a temple, where Mammon's daughter Philotime, richest of heiresses, is enthroned, surrounded by innumerable suitors; thence into Proserpina's garden, where the marvellous tree laden with golden apples grows in the midst, stretching its broad branches over the whole garden, and overhanging the black floods of Cocytus.

In the river, Guyon perceives the innumerable host of the damned, among whom he distinguishes Tantalus and Pilate. Thus by degrees the dwelling-place of Mammon, who is avarice and greed, has extended until it touches upon the confines of the pagan Avernus and the Christian Hell. The gradual broadening of the scene (which symbolises perfectly the awful progress

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of Vice through the human soul) is effected with magic power.

In that Land of Fairy the ears are no less startled than the eyes. The sounds we hear call up infinite echoes. The braggart Braggadochio and his fellow Trompart are hiding in a forest when they are startled by the call of Belphebe's horn:

... They heard a horn that shrilled clear
Throughout the wood that echoèd again
And made the forest ring, as it would rive in twain.

Arthur, when he arrives before the Castle of Temperance surrounded by myriads of foes, comes near the ramparts,

And winds his horn under the Castle wall,
That with the noise it shook as it would fall.

At another time he penetrates with Una into the Castle of Orgoglio, where the Red-Cross Knight is detained as a prisoner. They walk through many rooms and halls without finding the captive whom they seek. At length they come to an iron door which no key can unlock, but in the door is a small opening through which Arthur calls with all his might:

Therewith an hollow, dreary, murmuring voice,
These piteous plaints and dolours did resound:
"O! who is that which brings me happy choice
Of death, that here lie dying every stound,
Yet live perforce in baleful darkness bound?" ...

Nothing can be stranger than this voice issuing from the depth of some unseen dungeon or pit into the empty halls of the wide deserted castle.

Such are some of the sights and sounds in that Fairy Land which gives both background and atmosphere to all the visions of the poem, and imparts a kind of unity

to all these countless changing scenes and adventures. We gain the general impression of a moonlit country where the sounds echo far in the silence, where light and shadow are in stronger contrast than in day-time, where marvels are to be expected, being as it were native to those regions. It is in this imaginative unity that the true grandeur of the *Fairy Queen* is revealed. Such unity is rare in all long poems or romances. It was exceptional at the time of the Renaissance, when poetry, overpowered and overloaded by countless borrowings, seldom succeeded in blending them harmoniously into one. The want of this all-pervading atmosphere is felt, for instance, in the more ambitious productions of our own poet Ronsard, splendid though the quality of his poetry. However vivid his mythological or allegorical images may be, when taken one by one, they do not beget the dreams that are born of illusion. He does not take us into that marvellous country where the most heterogeneous conceptions are reconciled, where the wildest fancies are at home.

The dreamy mood induced by the reading of Spenser's poem could of course only be engendered by suggestions that applied simultaneously to the eye and ear. As in the mask or in opera, music must play all the time, while the many scenes pass in succession before our sight, to lull our powers of reasoning. This the poet effects by using one great monotonous stanza. All English critics agree in their praise of its structure—it is the old eight-line ballad stanza of the French, with a final alexandrine added to it. Thus lengthened and as it were ballasted, it acquires an amplitude and

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slowness which, in place of its former lightness, give it the even flow of a broad stream. It is enough that it should be a stanza, and that Spenser should employ it throughout the whole length of his romance, to give it far-reaching importance. We hear a slow music, whose perpetual return rocks the mind and soon sways it from out the real world into a world of harmony and order, of which it seems to be the natural rhythm. Spenser's stanza is the clock of fairyland. It beats time in the region of nowhere, in the kingdom of chimeras. There is hypnotism in its effect. All motions are governed by it and obey its law. It is the constant standard by which all the poet's imaginings are measured and meted out; it rules all actions and speeches. Never hurried, but eternally recurrent, it holds the ear like one of the elemental sounds, the sound of the wind or of the sea. No isolated stanza can give an idea of the considerable part played by the stanza-form in the poem, since each new one takes its effect from the gathered power of all that came before, from the sense we have of its fitness in the whole sequence, so that our minds, first acknowledging its conformity, then pass on to the feeling that it is necessary to the general harmony of the poem.

Had Spenser been less of a painter and more of a story-teller, he might never have substituted his nine-line stanzas for the *ottava rima* of his Italian masters, for fear of breaking his narrative by that final alexandrine which, owing to its ponderous and more solemn length, acts as a sort of conclusion each time it recurs. It marks out the passage from stanza to stanza and keeps each one more distinctly separated from its

neighbours. But Spenser loved the longer line for its architectural effect in his descriptions. Moreover the stanza, as he enlarged it, was in keeping with his normal period; with the broad sentence which even in prose was natural to him and his contemporaries. His stanza was the mould appropriate to his syntax and his thought. And for that reason, though it was to be used after him by many, and by some prominent poets—Thomson, Byron, Shelley, Keats, among others—it never seems so well adapted to their breath and voice as it was to his. For later writers had a shorter, more analytical and disjointed way of thinking and expressing their thoughts than Spenser.

The stanza corresponded to the very genius of the poet—copious, redundant and prolix. It echoed his defects as well as his qualities. Of him his admirer Lowell could say: “No poet is so splendidly superfluous as he—none knows so well that in poetry enough is not only as good as a feast, but is a beggarly parsimony.” Spenser does not aim at nervous strength, at new, surprising juxtapositions or collisions of words. His manner is calm, equable, sustained. There are few striking innovations in his style. Keats professed, it is true, a singular admiration for one of Spenser’s epithets, “sea-shouldering,” applied to whales. A fine compound, indeed, and most suggestive. But you might perhaps run through all the twenty thousand lines of his *Fairy Queen* without finding its equivalent. Except for archaisms, his style flows on copiously, redundantly, harmoniously without arresting the reader. He has none of Lyly’s euphuism, or of

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Sidney's and Shakespeare's conceits, or of John Donne's metaphysical obscurities. His constant practice of an archaic style works in perfect accord with the stanza, so as to fuse and reconcile the many and varied elements of the poem. Archaism was somehow imposed upon the poet by his subject, by his wish to transport us into the far-away past, to the times of chivalry and ancient legend. By the uncouth spelling of his words, Spenser worked upon the reader's eye as by their obsolete sound he influences the ear. And how, if we are to get the utmost enjoyment, are we to read the *Fairy Queen*? As though it was an ancient manuscript, discovered in some half-ruined manor, which recounts the deeds of heroes that lived long ago. To present this poem in the most befitting manner, we should have it printed in Gothic characters. So would our imaginations fly back the more readily to an indefinite past.

I am afraid that I have not shown much reverence for Spenser's allegories, or rather, for their moral significance. But we have seen, from the artistic point of view, how great is their importance. Spenser believed all poetry to be allegorical by nature, and this led him, on the one hand, to devise that rigid allegorical framing as a mould for the disconnected outpourings of his imagination. On the other hand, this constant use of allegory has helped to create in his poem that apparent unity and harmonious atmosphere which make us forget or excuse the discordance of his personages and episodes. It is clear that to him the whole world, and everything that happens in this world, is an allegory. Venus is not substantially different from Acrasia, who is Luxuriousness,

nor Belphebe from Diana, who is Chastity. And when Sir Guyon, who is Temperance, stays in the House of Temperance, our minds are not confused by the anomaly. Gods and goddesses, virtues or vices personified, men and women have the same shadowy existence. The deities and abstractions, clothed in bodies like those of men and women, take on something of the human; and men and women lose some of their gross reality by impersonating in their turn some quality or defect.

Only when the strain of realism in Spenser leads him, as it does once or twice, to drop the allegorical and write like a novelist, such intrusions of real life in this kingdom of shadows leave us feeling almost offended. The most notable example of this occurs in his treatment of Britomart. Though she represents chastity, she seems at time to forget her rôle and become an impassioned lover, whose contradictory feelings are analysed as if she were indeed a woman of flesh and blood. However pleasant the cantos devoted to her desires and fears and jealousies and innocent maidenly hypocrisies, we cannot help feeling that they do not belong to fairy regions. We fear somehow that she may not be able to breathe such rarefied air. She is too substantial and too complex—an exception and an anomaly which we resent as even an artistic mistake, even while we enjoy the story of this full-blooded creature. The first two books, which are by unanimous consent admitted to be the most perfect of the poem, are, on the contrary, those in which the allegorical treatment is most consistent throughout.

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It is my firm belief that in the extraordinary plastic powers of Spenser, in his faculty of harmonising the most contradictory materials by enveloping them in an atmosphere of romance, allegory and dream, we find the supreme revelations of his poetic genius. This is why I have dwelt on them at some length and kept them for the conclusion of this study. It is the artistic, and not the moral or philosophical side of his work which appears to reveal his true greatness. Whenever we make his philosophy or ethics the basis of our examination, we feel that we are unsatisfied or at a loss. It is doubtful whether he had any message other than the poetical for the world of his own day, and it is certain that he has none for ours. He can only tell us what were the conflicting elements that warred against one another in the sixteenth century. His poetry, like his own thought, was a battlefield. In his verse the classic Renaissance and religious Reform ride against each other with spears couched, like the knights in his many jousts and tournaments. His was a pagan imagination, enraptured by all the beautiful forms, colours and sounds of this earth, with beauty, and above all the beauty of woman, for its polar star; his cherished faith was Platonism, which makes beauty the divine soul of the world. And yet this imagination, this faith, were always repressed and held in check by the Christian sense of the vanity of all sensual delights, by the fear of sin and the rightful worship of moral virtue. In his great poem, his innate voluptuousness is in constant antagonism with his earnest protestant, almost puritanical creed. He would sacrifice neither. But to

compromise and preserve them both, he only could append a moral to the most sensual of his scenes. He reminds us of the artist who paints a splendid woman in the nude and writes "Chastity" in the margin of his canvas; then paints another, no less beautiful, and, contenting himself with giving an evil cast to her eyes, then tells us that it is the portrait of Wantonness. The painter satisfies his moral scruples by giving the two pictures different titles. So with Spenser. His genius being above all else pictorial, he could do no more. His poetry gives us an endless series of splendid images, and only allows us to see as much of the soul as line and colour and gesture may reveal. More lies on the surface than underneath; there is a wealth of decoration, but a scarcity of feeling.

Consider what use he makes of Arthurian romance. He empties it of its human interest, of the drama of passions and of the play of characters, which are perceptible even in the work of a compiler like Malory, and are so obvious in Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*. Spenser introduces us to an Arthur without a Guinevere, without a Lancelot. A Tristram is there, too, but in Spenser's poem he has no Iseult. From that marvellous storehouse of passionate love-adventures, he has only taken names and accessories. The love-stories that he substitutes for those in the Arthurian cycle (except perhaps in the case of Britomart) may have attractions for the eye, but they make little impression on our hearts. We may be delighted by the manifold adventures, and especially by the strikingly picturesque scenes to which they give rise. But who can ever feel for the loves

of Red-Cross and Una, of Scudamore and Amorette, of Marinel and Florimel, of Calidore and Pastorella, of Calepine and Serena, of Arthur and Gloriana? Who could feel saddened when such mistresses are lost to other lovers? The characters are so superficially drawn that they are for the most part interchangeable. When allegories are married, we remain unmoved.

So we turn our eyes from the hearts and souls that lie concealed and gaze on the beautiful bodies which the poet so lavishly describes. Their outer physical charms often out-dazzle the inward lustre of virtue. The wanton nymphs of the Marvellous Fountain, in the Bower of Acrasia, are so enticing that they almost efface the pure and chaste image of Una. In the *Fairy Queen*, Eden appears less desirable than the palace of sinful pleasure. The poet does not intend it so, but he cannot help it, for however sonorous and sincere he may be when exalting virtue and condemning vice, his genius chiefly excels in the delineation of outward beauty. His morality often appears trite or puerile, or seems an afterthought, a mere sedative after his voluptuous appeal to our eyes. Morality does not seem quite at home among the manifold seductions of Fairy Land. Thus it is that at the conclusion of his Book on Temperance, Spenser makes the reader almost cry out against Sir Guyon for devastating the enchanted bower of false delights, when he

Of the fairest late, now made the foulest place.

Nothing can replace that magical garden of luxuriousness, or compare with it in splendour, and make amends for its ruins.

Spenser, who stands between Ariosto and Milton, comes much nearer in his poetry to the Italian voluptuary than to the great Puritan. He added to the former earnestness of endeavour rather than depth of moral significance, and left it to Milton, the admirer of the *Fairy Queen*, to attempt in his turn and almost succeed in that difficult task of reconciliation between Paganism and Christianity, between Beauty and Virtue.

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